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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, May 31, 2007

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, May 31, 2007

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*English*]

PRIVACY COMMISSIONER

The Speaker: I have the honour to lay upon the table the report of the Privacy Commissioner on the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act for the year 2006.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h), this document is deemed permanently referred to the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

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[*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) I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's response to two petitions.

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INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

Mr. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 34(1) I have the honour to present to the House, in both official languages, the report of the Canadian delegation of the Canada-U.S. Interparliamentary Group respecting its participation at the National Governors Association winter meeting, Innovation America, in Washington, D.C., February 24-27, 2007.

* * *

[*Translation*]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

FINANCE

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in

both official languages, the 20th report of the Standing Committee on Finance on Bill C-52, An Act to implement certain provisions of the budget tabled in Parliament on March 19, 2007, as agreed on Wednesday, May 30, 2007.

[*English*]

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITIES

Mr. Merv Tweed (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the sixth report of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. In accordance with the motion adopted on Monday, May 28, your committee recommends that the government provide the committee an opportunity to study and provide recommendations to the terms of reference of any review of Canada Post prior to its commencement.

Also, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the seventh report of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. In accordance with the order of reference of Tuesday, February 27, your committee has considered Votes 1, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, 60, 65, 70 and 75 in the main estimates under transport for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2008, and reports the same.

* * *

TERMINATOR SEEDS BAN ACT

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-448, An Act to prohibit the release, sale, importation and use of seeds incorporating or altered by variety-genetic use restriction technologies (V-GURTs), also called "terminator technologies", and to make a consequential amendment to another Act.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to table this private member's bill. Many in Canada share the conviction that Canada should join the ranks of countries like India and Brazil whose governments have already legislated bans on this technology in order to protect their farmers.

It is time to make a commitment to our farmers and the international community so that terminator seed technology will not be allowed to take root in Canada.

Routine Proceedings

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

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CANADA-PORTUGAL DAY ACT

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-449, An Act respecting a Canada-Portugal Day.

She said: Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to introduce this bill which seeks to declare June 10 as Canada-Portugal Day in appreciation of the Portuguese Canadians' contribution in Canada and in celebration of the friendship between Portugal and Canada.

On June 10, in Canada and throughout the world, persons of Portuguese origin remember their cultural roots by celebrating the life of Luis de Camoes, the author of *Os Lusíadas*, the epic poem about the history of Portugal prior to 1500.

Portuguese Canadians have a long history in Canada. Back in the 15th century, on the south and east shores of Newfoundland and the Strait of Belle Isle, Portuguese fishermen caught cod and dried them ashore. Names of Portuguese origin are found along the Atlantic coast of Canada. Canada and Portugal continue to work together and the first annual meeting of the Canada-Portugal committee on fisheries cooperation took place in Lisbon March 16-17, 2006.

In the 1950s, many Portuguese immigrants came to Canada to farm and helped construct railways. Since then, thousands continue to arrive to build our cities and towns. Today almost half a million people of Portuguese descent call Canada home.

With the declaration of June 10 as Canada-Portugal Day, Parliament will recognize and express gratitude for the contribution of the Portuguese Canadian community to Canada.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, if you were to seek it, I hope you would find unanimous consent for the following motion: That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practices of the House, when the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development convenes a meeting, it shall not be adjourned or suspended until it completes the committee stage of Bill C-44, except pursuant to a motion by a parliamentary secretary and, provided the bill is adopted by the committee, agrees to report the bill to the House within two sitting days following the completion of the committee stage.

•(1010)

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

* * *

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 56.1(1)(a) I move:

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practices of the House, when the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development convenes a

meeting, it shall not be adjourned or suspended until it completes the committee stage of Bill C-44 except pursuant to a motion by a parliamentary secretary and, provided the bill is adopted by the committee, agrees to report the bill to the House within two sitting days following the completion of the committee stage.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform moves pursuant to Standing Order 56.1(1)(a):

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practices of the House, when the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development convenes a meeting, it shall not be adjourned or suspended until it completes the committee stage of Bill C-44 except pursuant to a motion by a parliamentary secretary and, provided the bill is adopted by the committee, agrees to report the bill to the House within two sitting days following the completion of the committee stage.

Will those members who object to the motion please rise in their places.

And fewer than 25 members having risen:

The Speaker: Fewer than 25 members having risen the motion is adopted.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

[*Translation*]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I move that the ninth report of the Standing Committee on International Trade, presented on Friday, May 18, 2007, be concurred in.

I am very pleased to rise in this House and discuss a motion made by the Bloc Québécois and adopted by the Standing Committee on International Trade on May 15.

I should mention that the Conservatives did everything in their power to block and delay the adoption of this motion, but the opposition parties set aside partisanship to address this issue, which is crucial to the sovereignty of Canada and the Quebec of the future.

Before I go any further, I would like to read the motion, as adopted by the committee.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), and the motion adopted by the Committee on Tuesday, May 15, 2007 your Committee recommends:

Whereas Canada's water resources must be protected;

Whereas NAFTA covers all services and all goods, except those that are expressly excluded and water is not excluded;

Whereas this situation puts the provincial and federal laws concerning the protection of water including the prohibition of bulk water exports at risk;

Whereas a simple agreement by exchange of letters among the governments of Canada, the United States and Mexico specifying that water is not covered by NAFTA must be respected by international tribunals as if it were an integral part of NAFTA;

That the Standing Committee recommend that the government quickly begin talks with its American and Mexican counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA.

Routine Proceedings

Considering that the primary responsibility of democratically elected political parties is to represent the people and defend their interests, it is difficult to imagine that a party would refuse to support a motion intended to protect Quebec's and Canada's resources. Such a position has no basis in logic. Many people are afraid to embark on such talks, because reopening NAFTA would be like opening Pandora's box, especially since the winds of protectionism seem to be blowing south of the border.

These concerns are understandable, but it is possible to exclude water, without completely reopening the agreement. Far from being eloquent, the Conservatives' argument is mainly that there is no risk, so why talk about it?

Most of the people who appeared before the committee did not show the same gullibility or naiveté as the Conservatives. In any event, assuming that the Conservatives are right, nothing would stop them from taking a stand on this issue. This would reassure all Quebecers and Canadians, and would firmly show our American and Mexican neighbours that Canada has a consensus.

Refusing to take a stand on this issue shows the current government's lack of goodwill. Speaking of goodwill, the members of the Standing Committee on International Trade were shocked by the attitude of the committee chair, particularly when it came to the process for discussing and adopting the water motion, which we are talking about today.

We now all understand better what happened: the chair was only doing as he was told. It was a good try, but democracy won out, which goes to show how essential the Bloc Québécois is to the current Parliament.

To get back to the water motion, the question is whether or not bulk water can be considered a good. I would like to warn you that the Conservatives will mainly refer to water in its natural state. What is water in its natural state? It is water flowing down a river, or sitting in a basin. What is water if it has been removed from a riverbed or a basin? Since it has been altered, it is no longer in its natural state.

• (1015)

This distinction is essential in this case. Water in its natural state is effectively protected, but as soon any type of modification is made, water is no longer in its natural state and can therefore become a commercial good.

That is precisely what is pointed out in a document prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade:

Water does not become a good until it is removed from its natural state and enters into commerce as a saleable commodity,

That is very close to what we are saying, is it not? But let us go further. Again, according to the document from the department:

Water in its natural state can be equated with other natural resources, such as trees in the forest, fish in the sea, or minerals in the ground.

Can the government confirm that the forests, fish or minerals are not covered by NAFTA? Obviously not or the problem goes well beyond the debate we are engaged in today.

Therefore, by comparing water to those other natural resources, the government is confirming that water could very well become a commodity regulated by NAFTA. That shows how important it is to

exclude water from the scope of NAFTA. The threat is very real, indeed, too real.

In simple terms, water could be a commercial product, but as the Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement du Québec (BAPE) has recognized it is only the lack of profit in water exports that has so far protected Quebec water from being exported in bulk.

In 2000, the BAPE noted that the commercial value of water did not make it profitable to export water in bulk. But what would happen if the commercial value of water increased to the point that it made such a project profitable?

Given the climate change that our world is facing, our neighbours to the south expect increasing drought, which will have major repercussions, especially on the American economy. It is because of that very real possibility that we must act now to specifically exclude water from the scope of NAFTA.

In its report, entitled *L'eau, ressource à protéger, à partager et à mettre en valeur*, the Commission sur la gestion de l'eau au Québec asked the question, "Should Quebec export its fresh water in large quantities?" and answered with an emphatic "No".

The report pointed out that maintaining the status quo would be an unwise strategy given the current state of knowledge and the uncertainty related to climate change. That uncertainty is becoming more of a certainty. Climate change is increasingly considered to be a real and significant threat.

Since the publication of the BAPE report in 2000, scientific advances, such as the recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, better known as IPCC, have confirmed the fears raised in the BAPE report.

The report clearly indicates:

In the short term, Quebec must make the Water Resources Preservation Act permanent. On the federal side, the possibility of the renegotiation of NAFTA must be closely scrutinized.

That is what the BAPE had to say.

In other words, the motion presented by the Bloc Québécois is perfectly in line with the recommendation made in the BAPE report on water management. Given that natural resources are under provincial jurisdiction, the federal government must not encroach on provincial jurisdictions; rather, it must fill in the gaps in trade agreements, such as NAFTA, which do fall under federal jurisdiction.

Water, in and of itself, is under provincial jurisdiction, but have the provinces done their homework?

• (1020)

Will the federal government alone protect this resource? Quebec legislation prohibits the export of water in bulk, and every Canadian province, except New Brunswick, has similar legislation.

Routine Proceedings

However, there is no guarantee that this legislation will withstand a possible dispute by the Americans under NAFTA, which is the problem that this motion aims to resolve. The government says that NAFTA in no way limits our ability to protect our water resources. However, the situation is not so straightforward. Water is not specifically excluded from the scope of NAFTA. Most experts agree that water, in its natural state, is not subject to NAFTA. This protection, quite frankly, does not mean much. As already mentioned, water is in its natural state when it is not being used. The Americans would not purchase water from the Saguenay, only to leave it in the Saguenay. They would want to purchase water from the Saguenay in order to use it south of the border. Thus, it would not be in its natural state.

If a proposal to take water for export is put forward, we can no longer say that the water is not being used. If a contract is signed to that effect, a commercial transaction exists and trade agreements apply. Unless a commodity is specifically excluded from NAFTA through an exception under chapter 21 or a reservation, NAFTA applies the moment a commercial transaction is concluded.

In the absence of an exception, it is not the nature of the commodity that determines whether it is a marketable commodity. In other words, a U.S. company would simply have to put forward a proposal to export large quantities of water in order for NAFTA to apply, namely in terms of non-discrimination, national treatment or investment protection.

What about the witnesses who were kind enough to appear before the committee, that is, those who were allowed to speak? I must say that at the May 10 meeting, I was never more ashamed to be a parliamentarian. Preventing a witness from addressing the committee was not just embarrassing, but literally unbearable. Witnesses who had truly travelled from across Canada to provide us their testimony were silenced by the committee's chair. Again today, given recent revelations in the media on the Conservatives' code, we understand things better, but this is still inexcusable. Some had the chance to be heard. I should say "listened to", but for members of the government I use that term quite loosely.

Allow me to cite Peter Fawcett, Deputy Director at the U.S. Transboundary Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, who appeared before the committee on May 10. Mr. Speaker, I presume you will allow my loose translation of what he said, which was, "I just want to emphasize that this is the approach we've taken to deal with water—as a natural resource, in its basin". What happens when water is no longer in its basin? The witness was unable to give us an answer.

Another witness left quite an impression on the committee: Maude Barlow, National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians, who addressed the committee on May 1. Her remarks were clear, precise and easy to understand. Ms. Barlow has published a number of books specifically on water. Allow me to quote a few excerpts from Ms. Barlow's testimony in the committee:

One is that you won't see the word "water" in NAFTA. What you'll see is the reference to the definition of a "good" that was in the old General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. When you go to that, you will see water in all its forms, including ice and snow. NAFTA adopted the old GATT tariff notion of a good, so water absolutely, definitely, is in NAFTA, which supersedes the provincial laws; not one of the provincial bans on water exports would stand up to a NAFTA challenge. We have

to remove water as a good, an investment, and a service in NAFTA. We need to do that.

• (1025)

Ms. Barlow went on to say that:

[The Conservatives are] wrong in saying that NAFTA does not impact on the provinces and does not take precedence. A treaty between two countries, signed by the federal government of those two countries, is the overarching legislation. It implies everything and involves everything about the provinces. Of course the provinces don't have jurisdiction higher than that treaty.

I have here in my hand all of the legislation of the different provinces. It's a mishmash. New Brunswick has nothing—and they mean nothing.

Ralph Pentland, now retired, is considered Canada's leading senior bureaucratic authority on water issues. He is very clear that water is in NAFTA, as are all the legal opinions that you will find from everybody on all sides of the border—and when I say "border" I mean the political border. We even met with lawyers from the Canadian government when the Liberals were in power, and they all said the same thing: water is in NAFTA. You don't see the word. You have to go to the old General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to get the definition of a good, and there it is. It is in there as an investment.

There is much to talk about. In short, for a brief period of time British Columbia exported water to the United States, specifically to a region experiencing a shortage. However, the province quickly changed its mind at the cost of a secret out-of-court settlement based on the provisions of the infamous chapter 11 of the NAFTA.

Canadian water will not be at risk so long as Americans do not challenge provincial laws, which are all different, and demand the export of water as a commercial good governed by NAFTA.

Although the issue is complex and the implications far-reaching, the solution may be simple and achievable. Excluding water from NAFTA is an obvious example that simple measures often do the trick.

When the government's argument against a motion is summed up by "it is no use", while representatives of civil society are using every platform to make government aware of the extent of the risk, we should be asking questions.

The Bloc Québécois is proud to have introduced this motion, which is a good example of how the Bloc Québécois supports democracy in this House.

In closing, I will quote a few lines from the *Libre-Opinion* piece that appeared in *Le Devoir* on May 30, 2007:

The recent adoption by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade of a motion introduced by the Bloc Québécois, and supported by the opposition parties, to exclude water from NAFTA, deserves to be applauded.

It is in this context that I ask this House and all members to support this motion calling on the Government of Canada to begin formal talks with Mexico and the United States for the purpose of excluding water from the scope of NAFTA.

The Conservatives have told us repeatedly that water is not covered by the NAFTA, that it is excluded. Then why not spell it out? If the government and the Conservative members insist on being unclear, there must be something wrong. This motion is crystal clear.

Routine Proceedings

• (1030)

[English]

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Bloc member said he is tremendously anxious about water quality and the sale of water. Why, then, is the Bloc prepared to support the Conservatives' new fisheries act given that Bill C-45 gives corporate polluters a free hand to dump toxic substances in many of our lakes, rivers and oceans?

The St. Lawrence River, for example, is intimately connected with the Great Lakes, which are under tremendous stress and pressure. This Parliament should strengthen our laws to protect our water, so why is the Bloc supporting any bill that weakens the protection of our water? How can we talk about exporting water when our water might be further polluted or contaminated?

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Cardin: Mr. Speaker, we are talking about a possible export of water and the fact that NAFTA might permit the exporting of water.

I do not imagine that anyone would want Canada's and Quebec's water if it were completely polluted, other than to use for very rudimentary needs that would have no implications. When we are talking about the bulk removal of water, it is just as important, if not more so, to talk about water quality. The water we are conserving will have to be good quality, clean and pollution-free.

After the oxygen we breathe, which is essential to life, the second element that is essential to life is water. We must first ensure that the air is as pure as possible; and our water must then also be as pure as possible. Not only must it be pure, but it must also be protected. Water is not just a natural resource, it is a resource that is essential to life.

For example, I will cite a few situations that have occurred in the world. Let us recall the Aral Sea, which has practically dried up because of irrigation and because the water table was affected. We cannot allow this to occur. In the United States, there are developments being built in the desert, where housing complexes are being constructed and top dollar is being paid to have an oversized artificial lake. This will lead to a need for water. As they say, necessity is the mother of invention. On the other hand, the American need for water will mean that the United States will one day be wanting Canada's and Quebec's water.

[English]

Mr. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a follow-up question that is similar to that of my colleague. If we are really concerned about freshwater and water transportation, then we have to look at the largest reserve of water. Let us look at the Great Lakes, which hold 22% of the world's unfrozen freshwater. That is a significant amount of water. Our obligation on both sides of the border should be to protect that water and to make sure it is as clean and as usable as possible, generation after generation, as far ahead as we want to look.

We have been doing a poor job of that. This past weekend the Canada and the U.S. met and I know it is as large an issue on the United States side as it is on our side. We have to work collectively together to deal with that.

However, when we are talking about this motion and NAFTA and removing freshwater to a foreign country, which would obviously be the United States, that is absolutely not in NAFTA. Just to make sure there is no misunderstanding on that, in 1993 there was an agreement among the three countries to make that absolutely clear. The NAFTA deal only talks about this if it is a good. It is only a good if it is processed, either put in a bottle or put into some kind of process. In its natural form it is not a good and it is not part of NAFTA.

I do not understand where this motion is going and why there is a problem here. There is a problem, but the problem lies in dealing with that 22% of the freshwater in the world, not in this motion and not in removing freshwater to the United States in a form that would be obligated by NAFTA. I wonder if my colleague would respond to that, because those are the real facts.

• (1035)

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Cardin: Mr. Speaker, my colleague, the Conservative member, is using a bit of a diversionary tactic. What I am talking about is water in the context of NAFTA; he is talking about the water in the Great Lakes. We all know that when it comes to the Great Lakes, we have the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act, and that this is under federal jurisdiction, of course. As well, it involves the International Joint Commission. In that respect, when the member says that there are major problems, he must probably be meaning to refer to the problems that the Conservatives are encountering in negotiations about boundary waters.

The fact remains that Canada has to preserve its water. It must also work with the United States, because there are two parties here: the United States and Canada. They must work in the same direction to protect these great bodies of water.

That cannot be done without a firm will to protect not only the quantity of water, the whole range of watersheds, but also the quality of that water. A drop in the water level can have a horrific impact. The Americans will certainly be tempted, of course, to pump water from the watersheds, but because of the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act, we must ensure that these great bodies of water are protected. That much is obvious.

Once that protection has been granted, under the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act, we must still consider the question of water that is not expressly excluded from NAFTA. Yes, there are letters. Yes, there is an implementation act; but when will there be action? Is wood not a commodity, just like fish or ore? They are not commodities when they are in their natural state, but as soon as they are no longer in that natural state, they are commodities.

And that is what the United States wants to do, in the relatively short term.

[English]

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it seems as we move along with the trade agreements we signed many years ago that some of these issues still are not resolved.

Points of Order

I had the opportunity to make a presentation to an environmental assessment panel in Quebec City this winter on the relationship of energy to NAFTA in terms of the liquefied natural gas imports proposed for Quebec. Once again, there is no clarity on the nature of some of these products under these trade agreements.

Does my hon. colleague not agree with me that it is very important to push forward with our position on products, goods and services and to put our case forward as strongly as possible from the government and this Parliament to ensure that our trading partners understand where we are coming from? That is what I think this effort from the committee is working toward and it is certainly something that should be supported.

• (1040)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cardin: Mr. Speaker, I have here a note that I have to read to you to put things into context. Let us recall that, at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City, the U.S. president told a reporter that he saw Canada's water resources as part of America's energy security.

We know very well how the negotiations are conducted. For the SPP, the security and prosperity partnership, for instance, there have been discussions between firms of pretty important lobbyists, or at least ones with considerable political influence, from the three countries involved: Canada, the United States and Mexico. They have gotten together to talk about the water issue. That too comes under the security and prosperity partnership of North America and it shows how much the United States cares about energy security.

In this respect, certainly efforts have to be made. Efforts have to be made to defend the interests of Canada and those of Quebec, of course, in any of these forums, because the SPP is doing things that go against the values of Canadians and Quebecers. There is therefore a need for greater democratization. Canada has to assert its place in these negotiations, but it also has to speak for the values, aspirations and needs of the people, both Canadians and Quebecers.

The government must therefore show great resolve, so that any dealings with the United States are conducted fairly and everyone wins. Above all, we must not be exploited or let anyone exploit us.

[*English*]

Mr. Ted Menzies (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade and Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague, the member for Sherbrooke, for raising this today. We all recognize how important water is.

As well, of course, with all the discussions we are having of late about the environment and what is happening with our environment and the quality and quantity of our water, I think it is a relevant debate. It is misleading, of course, because of the premise of the motion we are debating, and I was part of that debate in committee, where I tried to raise the facts for the opposition members, who were not prepared to listen.

We heard a little lecture from that member this morning about committee procedures. I would beg to differ in regard to when a witness comes to committee and is totally off the topic that is being discussed that day and the chairman asks if the witness could please

bring it back on topic. I supported our committee chair because we had called in a witness to speak on a specific subject. Our chair made the right decision.

I will stand behind our chair's decision. We were trying to bring the debate around to the topic of that day. Not only did that individual show great disrespect for our chair, who has spent as much time in that chair as you have, Mr. Speaker, but I am sure that our committee chair should not be required to subject himself to disrespect any more than you should, Sir.

It is with great pleasure that I rise in the House today to speak to this important debate. As I have said, water is an important matter and an important resource for Canada. Compared to other parts of the world, Canada possesses a relative abundance of freshwater. My hon. colleague from Yellowhead has pointed out the volume of water that is within Canada's—

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Wascana is rising on a point of order.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I apologize for interrupting the parliamentary secretary. I do not mean to interrupt his speech. He will have an opportunity in just a moment to continue, but this has to do with another matter that occurred in the House earlier today at the beginning of the session.

I rise on a point of order concerning the government's use of Standing Order 56.1 to dispose of the committee stage of Bill C-44. This occurred earlier today.

I would like to refer specifically to a ruling by the Speaker on September 18, 2001, in which the Speaker said the following:

The expanded use of Standing Order 56.1 since 1997 causes the Chair serious concern. The government is provided with a range of options under Standing Orders 57 and 78 for the purpose of limiting debate. Standing Order 56.1 should be used for motions of a routine nature, such as arranging the business of the House. It was not intended to be used for the disposition of a bill at various stages, certainly not for bills that fall outside the range of those already contemplated in the standing order when "urgent or extraordinary occasions" arise. Standing Order 71 provides in such cases that a bill may be dealt with at more than one stage in a single day.

Mr. Speaker, that appeared in *Hansard* on September 18, 2001.

Therefore, in light of this ruling that is already provided, and referenced, I might say, in Marleau and Montpetit, acknowledging that the committee stage of a bill is a stage of consideration, the government can use Standing Order 78 to limit debate at this stage or at any other stage.

As indicated by the Speaker in the quotation that I referred to, Standing Order 56.1 "was not intended to be used for the disposition of a bill at various stages".

I would therefore, Mr. Speaker, respectfully request that you look at the motion adopted by the use of Standing Order 56.1 this morning and rule explicitly that the motion is out of order in relation to Standing Order 56.1.

Points of Order

I would point out, Mr. Speaker, that the aboriginal affairs committee is meeting very shortly and that is why I have raised the matter at this time. Your ruling in a timely manner would be most welcome on this issue so that the standing committee can know where it stands.

• (1045)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a similar motion was moved and adopted on October 3, 2006, concerning Bill C-24, the softwood lumber bill. That motion was challenged and the Speaker ruled the motion in order. The Speaker said at that time:

In fact, the effect of the motion is not unlike the effect of adopting a motion under Standing Order 26, which provides for the continuation of debate on a matter before the House, which is to say that it provides for an open-ended extension of the sitting for purposes of continuing debate on a particular matter. This, it can be argued, can be seen as the House managing its business and arranging its proceedings.

As I read the motion moved by the hon. the government House leader and adopted by the House, every member wishing to speak to the amendment and the main motion, who has not already done so, will be able to participate. The motion does not set a deadline for completion of the proceedings, as would be the case under time allocation or closure. Instead it simply extends the sitting of the motion then before the House. That is a significant difference. The precedents available to me, including my own previous rulings, are therefore insufficient in my view for me to rule the motion out of order on this occasion.

The motion the government House leader has moved is not unlike the motion moved on October 3rd. The only difference is that it concerns a bill that is before a committee. There is no deadline dictated to the committee as a time allocation motion would propose. Members are free to sit as long as they wish to consider Bill C-44. There is no deadline for reporting the bill back, except to direct the committee to report the bill back when it finishes its consideration of Bill C-44. The motion does not presuppose that the committee is going to adopt the bill. It simply says that if the committee adopts the bill, that it ought to report it back. That is what would normally happen.

With respect to committees being masters of their own destiny, that principle does not preclude the House from giving committees some direction. Committees are subordinate to the House. In fact, the House is the sole source of direction for committees through the Standing Orders and other motions. This is covered on pages 805 to 809 of Marleau and Montpetit. In part it says:

Standing committees are permanent committees established by Standing Order. They are mandated by the House to oversee a government department or departments, to review particular areas of federal policy or to exercise procedural and administrative responsibilities related to Parliament...other matters are routinely referred to them by the House for examination: bills, Estimates, Order-in-Council appointments—

It also says that the House can give an order of reference including “—conditions that the committee must comply with in carrying out the study—”.

I submit that Standing Order 56.1 is the proper means to achieve the objectives outlined in the motion. I refer you, Mr. Speaker, to section (b) of the Standing Order which says that Standing Order 56.1 is to be used:

—for the observance of the proprieties of the House, the maintenance of its authority, the management of its business, the arrangement of its proceedings, the establishing of the powers of its committees, the correctness of its records or the fixing of its sitting days or the times of its meeting or adjournment

As with the motion that dealt with the second reading stage of Bill C-24, the motion dealing with the committee stage of Bill C-44 can be seen as the House managing its business and arranging its proceedings.

• (1050)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to join the Liberal House leader in asking you to rule this motion out of order and to prevent the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development from meeting today to finish its work on this bill.

Like the Liberal House leader, I interpret this motion as being one of time allocation. As such, there are already precedents on this matter, including a Speaker's ruling on September 18, 2001. In his ruling, the Speaker said that Standing Order 56.1 should not be understood as another procedurally acceptable mechanism for limiting debate. Further on, with respect to government attempts to speed up business, he added:

The government is provided with a range of options under Standing Orders 57 and 78 for the purpose of limiting debate. Standing Order 56.1 should be used for motions of a routine nature, such as arranging the business of the House. It was not intended to be used for the disposition of a bill at various stages, certainly not for bills that fall outside the range of those already contemplated in the standing order when “urgent or extraordinary occasions” arise. Standing Order 71 provides in such cases that a bill may be dealt with at more than one stage in a single day.

Consequently, the Bloc believes that the motion was misinterpreted and that it should therefore be ruled out of order, as I said earlier.

Furthermore, this is a common sense issue. The witnesses we need to hear in order to debate this bill come from as far away as Saskatchewan and Alberta. This affects aboriginal communities. If the committee is forced to meet today to study this bill, members of the committee will not have access to all of the information they need to make an informed decision. There is nothing in either parliamentary privilege or precedence that justifies the motion before us.

[*English*]

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to offer up the support of the NDP caucus to the point of order of the House leader of the official opposition in that we believe it should be ruled out of order.

I will not go into the clauses and references. That has been done quite adequately. However, I would add the arguments that the NDP have in support of the point being made.

The first one is that we should not be and cannot be using a routine motion to effectively impose time allocation. In particular, we should not be using a routine motion when there are other motions available.

There are three versions of time allocation that would actually be applicable to this particular situation, of which the government has not availed itself, and there is also closure. As much as we may not like closure, it is still a legitimate tool that the government has available if it wishes to apply time allocation to this matter, rather than again using the routine motion provision.

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The other thing is, quite frankly the current Speaker and previous Speakers have reiterated that we cannot go through the back door when the front door is available. For that matter, we cannot go through the back door when the front door is not available. The fact is that the government ought not to try to go in through the back door using a routine motion for something that is one of the strongest powers that the House has, which is to shut down debate.

Therefore, if the government feels it wants to go down this road, it should get this back on track and we should proceed with one of the other tools that is available. However, we do agree wholeheartedly with the notion that this particular route is not appropriate, and in our humble submission to you, Mr. Speaker, we believe also that it should be ruled out of order.

• (1055)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleagues for their interventions, although I believe that you will find in your ruling that there has been precedents set, as was in the case of Bill C-24, and you will rule this motion in order.

I just want to respond to my colleague, the hon. House leader for the Bloc Québécois, who was making the argument that perhaps in some manner, witnesses coming from far afield would be inconvenienced. In fact, just the opposite is true. Witnesses are already here, witnesses from Saskatchewan and other provinces, since there is a committee meeting starting in approximately four minutes.

Therefore, there is absolutely no inconvenience to any witnesses. In fact, it gives them an even longer opportunity to present their case before the committee so that the committee will have the ability, should it choose to sit extended hours.

I would argue that there is more opportunity for not only witnesses but committee members to discuss this bill and in fact, that is quite the opposite of closure. It is giving all committee members an opportunity to speak for as long as they wish, which I think, quite frankly, is entirely democratic.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any other interventions on this same point of order?

At this time then I will begin by saying that it is unfortunate, although it was in the nature of the circumstances perhaps, that members did not have an opportunity to make the point of order when the actual motion was brought forward. However, it is in the nature of the exercise, so to speak, that members are not intended to be here when it is brought forward.

I have listened to the arguments. I think that the argument that the ruling in the fall somehow has bearing on this particular procedural move by the government is not entirely sound in the sense that that particular event had to do with the business of the House and not with the business of the committee.

I think that use of Standing Order 56.1 to direct the business of the committee, of any committee, is a new development in the House and one that I find out of order. The reasons will be provided in the future by the Chair, in the near future I trust, for the decision that is being made at this time.

I accept the point of order and I find that the use of 56.1 in this particular case was inappropriate.

* * *

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Mr. Ted Menzies (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade and Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, because of that interruption, I would hope that the hon. member for Wascana would now stay and listen to this stimulating debate. We are talking about a very important issue, an issue that is important to all members of this House, especially those from Saskatchewan.

As I was saying, Canada has an abundance of fresh water compared to other parts of the world. All of us who represent ridings across this country that are surrounded by water or have water passing through our ridings in the form of creeks and rivers realize this.

Along with our friends and partners to the south of the border, we are joint stewards of the largest group of freshwater lakes on this planet, that being the Great Lakes, as referred to by my hon. colleague from Yellowhead. Communities situated around the Great Lakes depend on this important resource and they look to their governments at all levels to work together to protect it.

That is why this government takes very seriously the protection of our water resources. Let me be clear at the outset that Canada has and will maintain full sovereignty over the management of water in its natural state in Canada. In doing so, we are in no way constrained or bound by trade agreements, including the NAFTA.

The opening comments by the hon. member for Sherbrooke are factually incorrect and in a lot of ways are very misleading. Some of the witnesses that he referred to I would suggest have not done their homework on the realities of what this government is doing to protect that resource.

There is no need to begin talks with our American and Mexican counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA because we already have such an agreement, since 1993, before the NAFTA even entered into force. Canada has a strong, comprehensive and internationally recognized regime of protection for our water resources.

The International Boundary Waters Treaty Act prohibits the bulk removal of water from boundary basins. It has been that way since 2002 when new amendments to the act came into force strengthening Canada's ability to protect this important resource. The provinces and territories have also developed legislation, regulations or policies to protect the water resources within their jurisdiction.

This solid regime is the result of a number of policies that have been put in place over the years including in response to the 2000 report from the International Joint Commission, the IJC, which recommended that we take further steps to protect our Great Lakes, not just at the federal level, but at the provincial and territorial levels also.

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In fact since the release of the report, the IJC has commended the Government of Canada for the added safeguards that it has put in place. I think Canadians can take immense pride in the work that their governments at all levels do to protect this important resource.

From a trade perspective our current regime is actually stronger than an all-out export ban could ever be. Water is protected in its water basin, in its natural state, before the issue of its export ever arises. This is an environmental protection measure of general application that helps preserve the integrity of the ecosystems that rely on this water for their health and vibrancy.

An export ban would not provide nearly the same high level of protection. Such a ban would only focus on water once it has become a good or a product, that is, processed or bottled, for example. The NAFTA parties have clarified that water in its natural state is not a good, and therefore is not subject to trade agreement. Under the current regime our water in its natural state is not subject to trade agreements.

I know that media reports, along with the members opposite, have focused on a set of private think tank meetings discussing future options for trilateral discussions relating to water. Let me be clear. Studies from private think tanks do not reflect Canadian policy. They are not funded by the Government of Canada and they are not part of our efforts to make North America more secure and more competitive.

● (1100)

However, I do think there is much scope for making Canada more competitive in the North American context. The NAFTA has given us a great start. There is no doubt that our partnership with the U.S. and Mexico has stimulated business, created jobs, and brought higher wages to Canadians. We continue to work with our partners to strengthen our trading relationships under the NAFTA and boost competitiveness and prosperity in all three countries.

For instance, we are working on reducing export related transactional costs and enhancing industry competitiveness through the NAFTA region. We are also working to bring our standards and regulations closer together to create more efficient supply chains and help our businesses compete. We are examining how all three countries might collaborate in trade agreements with other countries and how elements of newer free trade agreements might inform improvements to the NAFTA.

This focus on competitiveness is essential. When we look beyond North America, we see the continued rise of hugely competitive economies, nations like China, India and Brazil. We see the formation and the consolidation of trading blocs like the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Canada must be able to compete. Our position in North America is not only the basis of our national prosperity, it is a huge competitive advantage, one that we should continue to use for our benefit. That is why we will continue to work closely with our friends and partners in the United States and Mexico through the NAFTA and also through the security and prosperity partnership to bring down remaining barriers to trade and investment and make our economies more competitive on a global scale.

Through the NAFTA we have created the largest free trade zone in the world. Our competitors from around the world look at us in envy as having that opportunity to be part of that large of a trading zone. We have created one of the world's great economic partnerships. We have shown the world how three sovereign independent nations can collaborate for mutual benefit.

This government is committed to ensuring that the North American partnership continues to work for Canada and brings prosperity to Canadians from coast to coast. We are committed to doing this while protecting Canadian interests, including that of our water resources. We have a strong, internationally recognized regime of protection for our water resources. I can assure this House that we will continue to work with the provinces and the territories to ensure this regime protects our interests throughout the country for years to come.

● (1105)

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member spoke about the international trade committee and the problems that the committee had the other day with the witness. I was at that committee meeting as well and it was very clear to me that the witness was speaking to the subject and was a Canadian expert on the subject in terms of energy security as it fit under the SPP.

For the witness to be characterized in that fashion in the House of Commons, I simply cannot agree with that. The witness was speaking to a matter of great significance to Canadians, that of energy security. How it fits under the security and prosperity partnership is extremely important to Canadians right across this country at this time. For that witness to be muzzled by the committee chair was inappropriate. How does my hon. colleague see that the subject of energy security did not fit under the topic that was being discussed at the committee?

Mr. Ted Menzies: Mr. Speaker, I almost wonder if we were at two different meetings when I hear the comments from my hon. colleague sitting on my right, I might suggest, not necessarily on my right but sitting on my right.

The witness was obviously off the topic of discussion.

We could invite witnesses from all across the country. There are knowledgeable, credible witnesses from all across the country. We chose a witness we thought was going to talk about the security and prosperity partnership that we were discussing at committee that day and on a number days.

It is a very important issue. As I alluded to in my speech, it has created a prosperity for this country, not on the backs of anybody, but to the benefit of all. It has been beneficial to Canadians. It has been tremendously beneficial to our Mexican counterparts and to our American counterparts. We have a huge opportunity that some opposition members fail to recognize.

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To have an individual, belligerent at best, who was clearly off the topic of promoting trade, promoting security, promoting the environment that allows us to prosper from this to provide new jobs in Canada, we have been speaking a lot in this House lately about jobs in Canada. It is not just about protectionism. It is about allowing our Canadian companies the opportunity to compete internationally. That is what the NAFTA does.

My hon. colleague from Sherbrooke this morning went so far as to suggest that we should reopen and renegotiate NAFTA. Heaven forbid. We would never achieve the kind of agreement that has the benefits to Canada, the benefits to Mexico and the benefits to the United States that we have in this agreement now because of the increased protectionist mood south of the border.

● (1110)

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier (Alfred-Pellan, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the presentation of the parliamentary secretary to the international trade minister. Judging by what he had to say, it seems to me that his first priority is clearly international trade. He quickly mentioned the environment that is to be protected and water quality, but I do not think that he is really very aware of how valuable a natural resource quality water is.

In the bad old days, we did not pay much attention to this valuable resource and polluted it. Now we are cleaning up our water and want to conserve it because this valuable resource has been destabilized by human activity. It is being polluted very quickly.

The purpose of the motion introduced today is to protect this valuable natural resource, which is synonymous with Canada all over the world because we have so many waterways. They bring tourism to Canada.

I would like to know what the parliamentary secretary thinks about the issue of the environment, which is not necessarily protected by our big neighbour, the United States, when we look at the development of the oil sands. The development of the Alberta oil sands is responsible for 40% of all the greenhouse gas emissions in Canada. The Americans are purchasing great quantities of this oil and encouraging further development.

The parliamentary secretary must be happy about this from the standpoint of international trade. However, the economic effects of this pollution on our environment fully justify the establishment of some kind of protection for the valuable natural resource that is water because our neighbours to the south are certainly not very concerned about it.

I would like to know what the parliamentary secretary thinks about the pollution caused by this activity, with American encouragement and financing.

[English]

Mr. Ted Menzies: Mr. Speaker, for the hon. member to suggest that I passed over the environmental impact of this too quickly, I would suggest to the hon. member that in my former life I was a dry land farmer and, therefore, water is very important to my livelihood and to the livelihoods of my constituents in the riding of Macleod.

We live in the drainage of the Rocky Mountains. We have wonderful volumes of freshwater but that freshwater can be polluted. It has been suggested that we are polluting it through our oil and gas explorations. We take great exception to that because we are working diligently with the exploration companies that are working within my riding and all across this country to ensure we are protecting this environment.

The environment minister is working very hard to get this new plan in place, the first plan, I might remind the House, that any government in Canada has ever had. In fact, we are quite excited about the fact that our Prime Minister can now go to the G-8 conference with a plan. We have never had a Canadian prime minister who actually had an environmental plan to deal with greenhouse gas emissions, which my hon. colleague spoke about.

I want to share some of the things we are doing. Yes, oil exploration in the tar sands has been using too much freshwater so companies have taken the initiative to look at new ways of extraction and are using CO₂ to extract the oil from the sands. We are working on that. These industries have taken the initiative, with the support of this new government, to ensure we are protecting the environment.

● (1115)

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Mr. Speaker, it is a rare occasion when a New Democrat gets to ask the parliamentary secretary a couple of questions.

He talked about the tar sands and the level of protection for the water but he ignored the fact that there is an exemption on air pollution from the tar sands that is moving forward under his government's bills. He is ignoring one of the main sources of pollution that ends up in our water stream from the tar sands, which is the air pollution that eventually settles on the land and then works its way into the water system.

With the expansion of these oil sands without proper controls over air emissions of NO_x, SO_x and volatile organic compounds into the atmosphere, which will eventually end up in the water stream, does the member not admit that this will be one of the largest sources of pollution in his own region of the country over the next 20 years?

Mr. Ted Menzies: Mr. Speaker, the short answer to that is no. The premise of the question is almost objectionable because the hon. member makes it out like Albertans do not care. Of course we care. We have done a lot.

As I said in my previous intervention, companies have taken the initiative to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and they are becoming quite effective. Some of the smaller oil companies are now able to use CO₂ to extract the lower producing wells that some of the larger companies have moved beyond. This will contribute beneficially to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. It will benefit the issue that we actually started to talk about, that being water.

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Mississauga—Brampton South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak in this very important debate on the ninth report, which is a very straightforward report with a very straightforward recommendation.

I will talk about two components of the report and the first component reads:

Whereas Canada's water resources must be protected;

Whereas a simple agreement by exchange of letters among the governments of Canada, the United States and Mexico specifying that water is not covered by NAFTA must be respected by international tribunals as if it were an integral part of NAFTA;

That is very straightforward. It is not complicated. This report really emerged out of a discussion that we had with respect to the security-prosperity partnership. We had multiple meetings on that subject matter where we discussed this initiative. This initiative was brought forth in 2005 by the former prime minister, the member for LaSalle—Émard.

The former prime minister launched this partnership with respect to establishing a common approach to security, to protect North America from external threats and to prevent and respond to threats within North America, while ensuring the free flow of goods and services across the border.

It is anticipated that this will be achieved through the implementation of a number of specific initiatives, including improved regulatory cooperation and increased sectoral collaboration in energy, transportation, financial services, technology and other areas, and reduce costs of trade.

The three countries will also work together to handle stewardship of the environment, create a safer and more reliable food supply and protect citizens from infectious diseases.

This mandate is very straightforward but the SPP brought forward some concerns with respect to accountability, transparency, access by certain civil societies and unions, and the lack of, perhaps, public involvement and public engagement. Those were all legitimate concerns about process.

Therefore, we felt as a committee, much to the reluctance, possibly, of the current government, to spend a substantial amount of time discussing the security and prosperity partnership. In that process, we wanted to get a better understanding of that to ease some of the concerns brought forth by the Canadian public with respect to accountability and transparency.

We heard various testimony with respect to bulk water during that discussion and debate and I want to allude to one very troubling committee meeting. Based on what we heard and saw over the past few weeks, I believe it was a reflection of the government's book of dirty tricks that it was going to deploy in committee, a book on how to disrupt committees, how to antagonize certain witnesses who they disapproved of, how to control the agenda and how to create a lot of ruckus and noise in committees in an effort to disrupt Parliament and committees from functioning.

During that particular committee meeting, an individual from Alberta was speaking to the very important subject matter of bulk water. Although he was completely on topic, because the security-prosperity partnership is such a wide ranging initiative, as I just described earlier, the chair abruptly stopped the meeting and walked out. It was unfortunate that the parliamentary secretary did the same thing and accompanied him out. I would have expected better of him. It was very disappointing to see that.

That kind of committee behaviour leaves a bad taste with Canadians who send us here to represent them, to have a debate and

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discussions on meaningful issues such as this very important subject matter.

I want to speak to our position on bulk water but first I will define bulk water removal. According to Environment Canada:

Bulk water removal is

the removal and transfer of water out of its basin of origin by man-made diversions...tanker ships or trucks, and pipelines. Such removals have the potential, directly or cumulatively, to harm the health of a drainage basin.

Having said that, I would like to add a nuance in this definition, and I mentioned that there would be many. The small scale removal, such as water in small portable containers, is not considered bulk. The portion on bulk water removal has not been updated or reviewed since October 29, 2004.

• (1120)

The facts speak for themselves. When we were in government we did much to protect Canada's water supply. I will be referring to some of these facts from the Environment Canada website on Canada's watersheds and bulk water removal.

For those who are watching today's debate, I would like to define why Canada must continue to protect our water as a natural resource and not commodify it as bulk water for export.

Canada's major watersheds contain approximately 7% of the world's renewable freshwater supply and 20% of the world's total freshwater resources, including water captured in glaciers and in the polar ice cap.

Water is the lifeblood of the environment. It is essential to the survival of all living things, plants, animals and human beings. We have seen the combined effects of such things as climate change, although some in the government are still grappling with this concept, and the industrial and agricultural uses that have had such an irreversible negative effect on our water supply. Bulk water removal projects could have a further effect on our watersheds.

Canada's watershed is a fundamental ecological unit in protecting and conserving both the quality and quantity of water resources. Over the years, provinces, territories and the federal government have adopted a watershed approach as a key principle in water policy and legislation. The watershed approach recognizes linkages of water systems and the need to manage water within drainage basins, rather than a river by river or lake by lake basis.

The protection of Canada's watersheds and the ban on bulk water exports are important for the health and integrity of our environment, our communities and all Canadians. While we were in government, Canada's strategy to prohibit the bulk removal of water from major Canadian water basins, including for the purpose of export, was both environmentally sound and consistent with Canada's international trade obligations. It was built upon sound water management principles and the need to protect the integrity of Canada's watersheds.

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As I stated earlier, Canada's water is a shared responsibility between the federal, provincial and territorial governments and each have an important role to play in protecting Canada's freshwater resources. The strategy recognizes that provinces have the primary responsibility for water management and that the Government of Canada has certain legislative authorities in the areas of navigation, fisheries, federal land and shared water resources with the United States. Actions by territorial governments are also becoming increasingly foreign as they assume greater responsibility over water resource management.

All governments have an important role to play in achieving a permanent Canada-wide solution to the prohibition of bulk water removal, including removal for export purposes. This strategy respects Canada's trade obligations because it focuses on water in its natural state. Water in its natural state is not a good or a product and, therefore, is not subject to international trade agreements, but we need to be crystal clear about this.

As I have indicated before, the Liberal Party does not support the bulk water export diversion and commoditization of Canada's water resources. That is our clear-cut position. I will tell the House why we supported this motion in committee. As I alluded to before, I was very disappointed with the government's behaviour with respect to how it conducted itself in committee by not allowing witnesses to express their thoughts. The idea of committee hearings is to get a wide range of viewpoints on various subject matters. The security-prosperity partnership is one of those key issues that needed to be discussed in committee.

If we look at the government's track record, not only did it try to disrupt the committee but, with respect to this particular motion, it tried to filibuster. We discussed this motion numerous times. We finally had to make it clear to the government that we were willing to stay in committee as long as needed to ensure this motion was passed. I think the government finally came to that realization and eventually called this motion to a vote.

I was very disappointed with the government's behaviour and, hopefully, it can explain its behaviour in the question and answer session today.

When we look at the government's track record with respect to how we define our relationship with the United States, one clear-cut example of the government during its mandate was the softwood lumber agreement. In that particular agreement we clearly saw that the government sold out Canada's position. That raises an alarm. I will clearly articulate in a short time period why that is.

• (1125)

First, the government imposed a restrictive quota on the industry. Now it is beginning to realize the ramifications of this. Not only is there a decline in the price of softwood lumber, not only is there an increase in the strength of our loonie, but we also have to deal with quotas and this is really hurting our softwood lumber industry.

Then the government broke a promise, and that is nothing new. The government promised that it would collect the entire portion of duties held by the United States, but left \$1 billion on the table. We only collected 80¢ on the dollar. Again, this is a clear cut broken promise. A lot of money was left on the table.

At that time, the government asked us to allow it to leave \$1 billion with the United States and the U.S. lumber coalition because it would give the industry some sort of stability and security for seven years. The government misled the industry. All the NAFTA and WTO rulings went completely out the door. We cannot use them to our benefit in terms of setting precedents. We can only refer to them. All the hard work of litigation and the many years of winning court battles went completely out the door. What happened? Seven months into this so-called new softwood sellout agreement we find that there is a possibility of arbitration in the very foreseeable future.

When it comes to the government and why we have issues with respect to its ability to protect Canada's interests, this is a clear cut example of how it sold us out.

I had the opportunity to travel to beautiful British Columbia last week to talk with some of the key stakeholders with respect to the softwood lumber industry. I see the member for Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam sitting here today. He is an individual who fully understands the importance of the softwood lumber industry, and has talked about this. Maybe, as parliamentary secretary, he could talk to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade as well and really convince the minister to acknowledge that the government made a mistake on this file and that it has completely sold out the industry.

If we look at this issue in general with respect to bulk water diversion, why do we have such concern? Why do we want something in writing with the United States or Mexico? It is because of this example with the softwood lumber industry.

As I said, I was talking to stakeholders in B.C. who were completely devastated by how they were misled by the Canadian government and by the Minister of International Trade. Sawmills are being closed and people are losing their jobs. The agreement is just absolutely crippling the industry's ability to compete. This has been systematic and problematic throughout the government's administration over the last year and a half, since being in power.

The motion is a reinforcement of the opposition parties coming together and reminding the government that it has an obligation and a responsibility to protect Canada's interests on its vital resources. It is a way to ensure it stands up for Canada. It is not simple, political rhetoric. The government must ensure that it genuinely does this. The government has really turned its back on the industry with respect to the softwood lumber agreement.

I have articulated before the position of the Liberal Party on bulk water, which is very clear. The Liberal Party does not support the bulk water export diversion and commoditization of Canada's water resources, plain and simple. When we were in government, we took all possible measures to ensure that. We encourage the current government to do the same as well.

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This is a very straightforward report. I hope that after listening to my remarks, the parliamentary secretary can encourage the minister and his government to reconsider their position on this very important motion and unanimously provide support in the House. Hopefully, we can send a clear cut message to Canadians that we will protect this vital resource. We respect our relationship with the United States. We respect the fact that it is our number one trading partner and our best friend. However, we will not be bullied. Nor will we compromise our position. We will do the right thing and stand up for Canada.

Again, I encourage the government to take a clear cut position on this issue, reverse its position on its motion and support us and the other opposition parties in ensuring that bulk water export diversion and commoditization does not take place.

• (1130)

Mr. Ted Menzies (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade and Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am a little confused by some of the hon. member's statements.

First, let us remind ourselves that we are actually talking about water. We have talked about oil sands. We have talked about softwood water. We have talked about many things. However, with the importance of water, we should try to keep on topic.

Following the lead of my hon. colleague from Mississauga—Brampton South, who talked about the softwood lumber agreement, my recollection in committee is the Liberal members of the committee, in recognizing their failure over 13 years of not getting an agreement in the softwood lumber dispute and simply fuelling the litigation, supported us. Prior to that infamous election, where the Conservatives finally took back power, the Liberals claimed they were awfully close to an agreement. We have seen some of the language around that agreement. The argument that we left \$1 billion on the table is peanuts compared to what the Liberals were willing to leave on the table.

However, we must thank the Liberal Party for helping us get that softwood lumber agreement through because it has brought some stability to this industry. We realize they realized the error of their ways and came around to supporting us.

I do also want to clarify something. The hon. members might be aware of the statement by the then environment minister, now Leader of the Opposition. He said:

Let me say something that will not change. The law of the land in Canada is that we do not allow bulk water removal, period.

Does the hon. member support his leader's statement?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments made by the hon. member. The parliamentary secretary has a couple of portfolios that he manages, so he has a lot on his plate.

I will very quickly touch upon the softwood lumber agreement to which he alluded. Then I will answer his question with respect to my leader's remarks.

He said today that a \$1 billion is peanuts. That is on the record in *Hansard*. Can members believe that? He should tell that to the companies that are laying off their employees. He should tell that to

people in northern Ontario, Quebec, B.C., Alberta and across the country who are losing their jobs. A billion dollars is not peanuts. That is a substantial amount of money that the industry gave up because it believed in the government. It believed that it would get seven years of stability. What did the industry get? Seven months and it is back in the courts, back into arbitration.

We all want stability in our business environment, but the government misled industry and misled Canadians.

With respect to the Liberal Party's position with respect to bulk water, I have been crystal clear in my remarks that we do not support bulk water export.

What is wrong with sending a simple letter to our counterparts in the United States of America to confirm that? There is absolutely nothing wrong with it. What does the government have to hide? Is this another initiative that it plans to pursue in the SPP?

• (1135)

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I always appreciate hearing the member for Mississauga—Brampton South, and I appreciate his work on committee. However, I cannot let the comments that he just made go by. I have a lot of respect for him personally, but to say now that the Liberal Party suddenly woke up to the fact that the softwood sellout has been incredibly detrimental to the softwood communities across the country just defies imagination.

The softwood sellout came from a Liberal minister who crossed the floor and brought it to the Conservative Party. The only good environmental thing the Conservatives ever do is recycle old Liberal policies. The Conservatives brought it to trade committee. As the parliamentary secretary even admits, Liberal members on the trade committee forced through the softwood sellout, even though we knew it would result in thousands of lost jobs. Then the Liberals Senate pushed it through before Christmas.

Liberals have their fingerprints all over the crime scene. Yet the member for Mississauga—Brampton South tries to pretend that the Liberals woke up to the fact that 5,000 jobs were lost within weeks of this incredibly irresponsible sellout being put into place, Conservatives being assisted by their accomplices in the Liberal Party.

I cannot let that go by. It simply defies imagination that anyone could try to pretend the Liberals were not duplicitous and explicitly involved in every stage of the softwood sellout.

I want to come back to the member's point about the Liberal Party and water exports. The Liberals, among the many promises that they broke after 1993, had promised to ban the commercial export of water, but never did so, which is why we are in this precarious position today. In 2002 a Liberal government actually opposed installing water as a human right.

How does the member, who I respect a lot, mesh all these contradictions with the comments that he just made in the House?

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Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Speaker, again, I appreciate the enthusiasm and the energy of my colleague, but I remind him that we opposed the softwood lumber sellout. We opposed it, and he should be made aware of that. When we stood in the House, we opposed it. We understood that it was a bad deal. It was a bad deal for Canada and it was a bad deal across the board.

If we asked the premiers now, if we asked the lumber industry experts now, they are incredibly skeptical. Why? Because they were told seven years of peace, of stability, but in seven months we are back in the courts.

A billion dollars, which the parliamentary secretary has said is only peanuts, is not peanuts. Thousands of jobs were lost. The most important element of it as well is the member for Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam knows full well that in his province Canfor and West Fraser are closing down mills. Imagine, these large, successful companies are closing down mills because of the softwood sellout. I hope the government can explain this to industry as well.

Going back to the member's question with respect to the Liberal Party's position on bulk water, we have been very clear. We have always stood up for this. We did so during the NAFTA debate. We did so when we were in government. Today, again, we take a clear-cut position that Liberals do not support the export of bulk water.

• (1140)

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it does remind me of that famous C.D. Howe quote “what's a million”. I guess with inflation now, it is now “what's a billion”. A billion is peanuts now.

I direct the hon. member's attention back to the matter being debated. It says “water resources must be protected”, which seems agreeable. It says that NAFTA expressly excludes water from NAFTA, which seems sensible. There is a prohibition on bulk water exports, which seems perfectly sensible. All it is requiring is a simple agreement among the various affected parties, Canada, U.S. and Mexico to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA.

Then bizarrely, the Conservative Party submits a dissenting opinion, which says absolutely nothing. What does the member think of the Conservatives' position on this? This is strange indeed.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Speaker, the member's question is very clear-cut. Yes, we did divert a bit by starting to talk about the softwood lumber agreement, and understandably so because it is a very important issue, but nevertheless this report clearly outlines in very succinct fashion what the issue is here. We want to make sure that Canada's water resources are protected.

We want to do this, as I said earlier in my remarks, with a simple agreement by an exchange of letters. I do not understand, and I too am completely baffled, why the government would have any issues or difficulties with respect to following this procedure.

We heard from various witnesses in committee during the security and prosperity partnership discussion about the issue of water diversion, bulk water export, and that is what prompted this report. This report does not say anything that would compromise the government's position. In fact, it would actually show to the Canadian public that the government wants to stand up for Canada's

interests, so I again want to encourage my colleagues across the floor to make sure that they change their position. They have done it on interest deductibility. They can do it on this as well and take a position to support this report.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Vancouver Island North.

I am pleased to speak in support of this motion that has come forward today. As we know, this motion is coming forward as a result of the work of the NDP in this Parliament. The SPP hearings, the hearings on the security and prosperity partnership, or deep integration, which the NDP forced at the international trade committee, have resulted in the first piece of what will have to be many different pieces of debate and discussion in this House of Commons.

We know that the SPP agenda started by the Liberal Party in 2005 is another piece of legislation recycled from the Liberals to the Conservatives. As we have seen in so many cases, the change in government has meant simply a change in entitlement. Now the Conservatives feel they have the entitlements that the Liberals used to feel they had, but essentially many of the policy directions are exactly the same.

Such is the case, of course, when it comes to the SPP, the security and prosperity partnership, or deep integration. A Liberal agenda was put in place and essentially organized behind the scenes, away from parliamentary scrutiny, away from public debate, and we have seen the Conservatives simply leap onto that bandwagon with enthusiasm, continuing the secrecy and the lack of public consultation. They are continuing to have decisions being taken behind the scenes that are extremely important to Canadians and are kept away from parliamentary scrutiny.

The NDP forced these first hearings on the SPP. What have we learned from these first hearings? They simply expose the tip of the iceberg, really, in terms of the overall agenda that is in place for the SPP put in place by the Liberals and continued by the Conservatives. Below the surface there are many other areas that need to be brought out into public scrutiny and public debate for meaningful public consultations. They need to be brought out for parliamentary debate.

We have learned just within these first few hearings about a number of things that should be very worrisome to Canadians. First off, we learned that the Conservative government is now pushing for more pesticide residue on the food that we eat in Canada. In an effort to eliminate these impediments to trade, the Conservatives are willing to allow a greater amount of pesticide residue.

The United States has the weakest environmental regulations in the western world when it comes to pesticide residue, far weaker than Europe's, for example, and yet this Conservative government is now pushing forward so that Canadians consuming food in Canada will have a greater amount of acceptable pesticide residue.

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We know that pesticides are directly tied to many diseases, such as Parkinson's disease, but the Conservatives, like their Liberal predecessors, do not seem to be concerned about the health implications for Canadians. They are simply pushing through these regulation changes that would allow for more pesticides to be consumed by Canadians, unbeknownst to them, of course. It is completely unacceptable. As we know, the vast majority of Canadians want to see safer regulations. They want food that is much safer, yet we have seen the Liberals and Conservatives pushing exactly the opposite way in an effort to appease Washington.

Another example is safety regulations. Again, started by the Liberals and continued under the Conservatives, we saw the same attempt to try to diminish the number of flight attendants on Canadian flights. Flight attendants are extremely important in evacuation procedures. In the event of a major disaster with an airplane, it is the flight attendants who assist the passengers, particularly seniors and people with disabilities, in getting off the plane.

Again, this SPP agenda wants to diminish the number of flight attendants on Canadian planes. In the event of an accident where an evacuation needed to happen, there would be fewer flight attendants to assist those passengers. As we saw with the Air France disaster two years ago, it is vitally important that the flight attendants be there. In the Air France case, the flight attendants saved lives. In the case of any other potential disaster, it would be the same thing. The NDP pushed back and we stopped the government from doing this.

Those are just two examples of the types of initiatives the Conservatives are taking behind the scenes.

• (1145)

There are over 300 different regulatory areas in which this is happening, hidden behind the scenes, away from public consultation, away from any sort of public debate, and away from parliamentary scrutiny. This is taking place. It is an example of to what extent the Conservatives are willing to implement the Liberal agenda and to push through what is bad policy for Canadians.

Why are they doing this behind the scenes? As their allies, the corporate CEOs around the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, said, they did not believe that the public really wanted to have debates on these issues. As for what that means, what they are saying is that if the public found out what the Conservatives are doing, which is like what their Liberal predecessors did, Canadians would be profoundly disturbed by the direction the government has taken.

That is why they do not want this debate out in public, to the extent that we saw the chair of the international trade committee shut down the committee hearings on energy sovereignty. Gordon Laxer, an Albertan representing the Parkland Institute, one of the most respected Alberta institutions, came to speak in Ottawa on behalf of most Albertans who are concerned about the giveaways we have seen from both the provincial and the federal Conservatives.

An Albertan from the Parkland Institute, an important and reputed Alberta institution, came to Ottawa to give testimony on energy sovereignty, on what the Conservatives have given away, like the Liberals before them. Under proportionality, Canada is the only

nation on earth that supplies a foreign country before it meets the needs of its own citizens.

Mr. Laxer was providing testimony to that effect. Most of eastern Canada now is supplied by offshore resources coming from the Middle East and other foreign countries. In the event of a supply shortage if that imported oil is cut off, we actually are forced to continue to supply the American market first, which means literally that Canadians freeze in the dark because of the Conservatives and their Liberal predecessors being completely incapable of standing up for the national interest.

When Mr. Laxer provided that testimony, the chair of the international trade committee tried to cut him off because he simply did not want Mr. Laxer's testimony to get out in the public domain. When the committee overruled him, the trade committee chair, unbelievably, showing profound disrespect to Albertans and all Canadians who are concerned about this issue, walked out of the meeting, trying to adjourn it.

For Canadians who are watching today, let me say that we now have that testimony restored, and they can find out what Mr. Laxer said about the incredible recklessness and irresponsibility of the Conservative government in giving away our energy resources without looking to Canada's interests first.

That brings us to the question of exports of water. Essentially, within the Conservative implementation of the Liberal agenda we now have, unbelievably, the issue of water exports back on the table. The vast majority of Canadians are opposed to water exports and water diversion. They are opposed for a number of reasons. One is because of the environmental devastation that results from this, and we have seen this in case after case where Canadians have spoken out on these issues, but also they are opposed because it makes no public policy sense whatsoever.

We may have a bank account that is rich in that we have 20% of the world's freshwater, but we only have about 6% of the world's renewable freshwater. In a very real sense when we talk about our water resources, that is our bank account. That is the 20% of standing water resources that is largely invested in our lakes, streams and rivers across the country, but its renewable resources are actually only equivalent to those of the United States.

The United States has been reckless with its use of water. Unfortunately, even though many Americans are speaking out on this issue, what we are seeing from those who now would seek water, rather than apply environmentally sustainable policies, is pressure to simply take Canadian water, as if somehow having a few more years of freshwater supplies from Canada is going to avoid the environmental catastrophes that many people apprehend in the United States.

It is simply not acceptable to share our water. If any bulk water exports or diversions start, under NAFTA right now they cannot be stopped. That is why the NDP is supporting this motion. We need to make it very clear that bulk water exports and water diversions are unacceptable and they are not environmentally sustainable. The NDP corner of the House will be fighting the SPP agenda and fighting water exports. That is why we in the NDP support the motion.

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• (1150)

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Mississauga—Brampton South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member has talked passionately, and I have worked in committee with this member as well, about his party's position on water diversion and bulk water exports, and I think there is unanimity among our party members as well.

However, in his comments he did not specifically mention a discussion that was touched on earlier. The member comes from British Columbia and he resides in that beautiful province. I would like to hear his remarks with respect to concerns and issues surrounding the softwood lumber agreement.

I would like to ask how he sees that unfolding in the next few months in terms of the feedback that he is getting from industry, from workers, from the province, from the provincial members of the legislative assembly, and what their thoughts are on this very important legislation that has really compromised Canada's position in terms of its ability to protect and support a very vital industry that generates thousands of jobs and billions of dollars worth of exports. I would like to hear his views on that as well.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Mississauga—Brampton South for his question. Unfortunately, he is not going to like my response because I have to repeat the issue of the Liberal involvement in the softwood sellout. If the Liberal Party had chosen to work with the NDP, it would have been able to stop the softwood sellout.

The former Liberal minister crossed the floor with the original draft softwood sellout that came from the Liberal Party and brought it over to the Conservatives. I realize he was not a member of the trade committee at the time and that is unfortunate, but the Liberal trade committee members pushed with the Conservatives to get it through, despite the consequences. They wanted to get it through no matter how many thousands of jobs were lost, no matter how they compromised Canada's position.

We actually won in the Court of International Trade, so the Americans were obliged to pay every single penny back. We were a few months away from the finish line of winning every single cent back and unimpeded access to the American market, and the Conservatives, instead of saying, "We now have a court decision that gives every penny back, subject to one appeal", blew it up and destroyed it because they simply did not understand the file. The Liberals on the trade committee helped get it through. Liberals in the Senate then adopted it, when they could have stopped it.

Unfortunately, I cannot give the answer the member is looking for. The results have been disastrous. Why did the Liberal Party not try to work with the NDP to stop this deplorable, reckless—

• (1155)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Questions and comments, the hon. member for Windsor West.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to ask the member for Burnaby—New Westminster a question about the Great Lakes.

One of the interesting things that was recently brought forth by the United States was to actually turn the Great Lakes into firing ranges

for gunboats, which would have put lead and other types of contaminants in the water, as well as safety hazards.

The New Democratic Party was the only party to actually make a submission opposing this. I want to ask him what his confidence is in the government's negotiations because what was interesting was that the government's response was late. It was past the deadline, so it actually had no official commentary made to the United States. Luckily for ourselves, many Canadian and American organizations and groups actually opposed this, got submissions in and we had that ceased.

I would like to ask him what his confidence is in the government in terms of negotiations, when it cannot even meet a simple deadline to protect one of the most important water sources on this planet.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, I would like to compliment the member for Windsor West for his work on that file. This was extremely important, and in this corner of the House, the NDP always seems to be on top of our files.

That is why we have pushed against the SPP, the only party in the House to do so. That is why we fought against the egregious softwood sellout, the appallingly bad and irresponsible softwood giveaway, which certainly will leave very few Conservatives standing in British Columbia after the next election. They well know that is why their numbers are collapsing in British Columbia. British Columbia has been at the epicentre of the thousands of lost jobs because of this egregiously bad policy.

Do I have any confidence in the government's ability to negotiate? Do I have any confidence in Mickey Mouse or Daffy Duck negotiating on our behalf, any more than the trade minister? For goodness' sake, softwood lumber, the firing ranges on the Great Lakes, and now we have the South Korea agreement. Giveaway after giveaway—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Order, please. Resuming debate, the hon. member for Vancouver Island North.

Ms. Catherine Bell (Vancouver Island North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Burnaby—New Westminster for sharing his time with me today and for his work on the international trade committee. We have heard his passion and dedication. His work on this file is where this motion comes from. It is a result of the direct work that the NDP did at this committee. I know the hon. member works long and hard there.

I want to talk about water policy and water in general. Water is vital to people's health and livelihoods. In Canada we do not have a national water policy. We do not have a strategy to address urgent water issues. We have heard that there is no federal leadership to conserve and protect our water.

Our federal water policy is over 20 years old and is badly outdated. There is a growing list of the crisis facing our freshwater, including contamination, shortages, and pressures to export to the United States and Mexico through pipelines and diversions.

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The government needs to implement a comprehensive national water policy. What should that policy include? For starters, it should include a ban on the bulk export of water. Water is a finite resource and Canada has about 20% of the world's freshwater supply but only 7% of the world's renewable freshwater. The rest of the water is trapped in ice, snow and glaciers. Unfortunately, we are losing that part of our trapped water supply.

Canada and the United States share interconnected water systems. The Great Lakes provide drinking water to 45 million people. The Great Lakes charter annex agreement was signed back in December 2005 by Ontario, Quebec and eight U.S. states. This will allow diversions through permissive exceptions, but it does not guarantee a strong role for the Government of Canada to preserve and protect our water supply.

North Dakota is just one state that is facing water shortages. It is looking north for a new supply through diversions and inter-basin transfers.

Bulk water exports and diversions would leave Canada's water vulnerable to environmental depletion and to international trade challenges that could permanently open the floodgates to the parched U.S. states.

A new national water policy must ban the export of water, implement strict restrictions on diversions, and affirm the role of the federal government in international water issues. Once water is a commodity, there will be no chance to turn off the tap.

In April of this year, as my colleague mentioned, we learned about a document produced by a Washington think tank revealing that business and government leaders in Canada, the U.S. and Mexico are actively discussing bulk water exports. They met in Calgary on April 27 of this year to discuss the issue in a closed door meeting as part of a larger discussion on North American integration. This is something that thousands and thousands of Canadians are totally opposed to.

These meetings have many Canadians concerned about the government's direction with regard to the protection of this precious resource. I support the recommendations that the government quickly begins talks with their American and Mexican counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA.

Our thirsty neighbours to the south do not lack sufficient water resources. What they have is unsustainable urban sprawl and mismanagement of their resources. It is important to exclude water from NAFTA because NAFTA is designed to protect trade above all else. Water could be traded and exported even if it had a negative impact on Canada. We see that with our oil exports. We export 60% of our oil to the U.S. Even if Canada had a shortage, we would still have to do that.

There are many reasons why Canada needs a national water policy. In the year 2000 seven people died in the community of Walkerton, Ontario, when their drinking water was contaminated with the E. coli virus.

In 2001 more than 7,000 people were made sick during a three month period by parasite infected water in North Battleford, Saskatchewan.

● (1200)

In 2005 the people of Kashechewan, a Cree community in Ontario, were forced to evacuate their homes because of water contamination, and there are still problems in Kashechewan today, as my colleague from Timmins—James Bay has so passionately pointed out on many occasions in the House.

According to the Government of Canada, municipalities issue hundreds of boil water advisories a year, most as a result of water contamination.

Since December 16, 2006, hundreds of boil water advisories have been issued for first nations communities in Canada. This is an alarming trend. We see ourselves as a very clean, safe country, yet issue hundreds of boil water advisories. A new national water policy must create national clean drinking water standards, something that we do not have.

Communities across this country are in desperate need of money to pay for water pipes and filtration systems, which are now the responsibility of municipal governments. These governments are looking to private investors to rebuild infrastructure through public private partnerships.

Water is a public health and safety concern and is best managed, regulated and financed by public systems that are accountable to their communities. If we lose that accountability, we lose control of our water.

When for profit interests control drinking water, the quality decreases and costs increase, and there are many examples of municipalities which have gone down the P3 road far enough to learn that it is a bad deal for their communities.

The federal government has tied infrastructure money in its 2007 budget to public private partnerships. It is forcing municipalities down a very slippery slope to privatization and the loss of control of municipal water supply and management. A new national water policy must commit to the federal government investment plan for municipalities.

Water is essential for all life, but it is a finite resource. Even in Canada, a water rich nation as I said earlier, one-quarter of Canadian municipalities have faced shortages and currently one-third rely on groundwater, a resource on which we have dangerously little data to provide for daily needs.

Water shortages in the prairies cost \$5 billion in economic damage in 2001. We should think what \$5 billion could buy in infrastructure for some of these communities which are sorely lacking.

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At the same time, Canadians waste a tremendous amount of water every day. A new national water policy must implement a comprehensive conservation strategy and invest in water resource research and monitoring. Simple things such as turning off the tap while we brush our teeth can save an entire swimming pool of water per person per year. It is as simple as that. However, people need information to go on.

The North American Free Trade Agreement defines water as a service and an investment, leaving Canadian water vulnerable to thirsty foreign investors. Once Canada allows water to be withdrawn and transported to other countries for large scale industrial purposes, foreign investors must be given the same national treatment as Canadian companies. A new national water policy must also ensure that water does not become a tradable commodity in current and future trade deals.

Canada should also oppose the privatization of water as it allows for some of the worst human rights violations. We saw this in Ecuador, where the water supply became so expensive after being privatized that ordinary people could not afford it. Only the wealthy had access to water. This caused a revolt in the community when ordinary families had no other alternative but to demand access to their water. Recognizing the right to water would allow international law to address issues of unequal distribution, and safe water for drinking and sanitation in other countries.

Canadians are concerned about the lack of the current position on bulk water exports. The Conservative Party did nothing in the election to address growing concerns about the stability and quality of Canada's water supply.

Canadians know that the free market does not guarantee access to water, that bulk water exports could open the floodgates to trade challenges, that Canada's water supply is limited, that public water is safer, cleaner and more affordable, and that water is essential for people and nature.

• (1205)

Mr. Jim Abbott (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, CPC): Mr. Speaker, one of the concerns that I have, as a long sitting member of this House, is that when people read *Hansard* or when they might be watching these proceedings on television, they might presume that the people in this House are basing some of their comments on facts. Unfortunately, that is simply not true of the interventions by NDP members. They are feeding the black helicopter crowd. They are distorting the facts. As a matter of fact, they are not even coming close to the facts as they actually exist.

I would like to read into the record that through the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act, the Government of Canada prohibits the bulk removal of water from the Canadian boundary water basins, including for the purpose of export.

The federal government's prohibition is both environmentally sound and consistent with Canada's international trade obligations. It builds on sound water management principles and the need to protect the integrity of Canada's watersheds.

The IJC has commended the Government of Canada for its actions to prohibit bulk water removals.

In the case of NAFTA, Canada, the United States and Mexico clarified, through a joint statement issued on December 2, 1993, that nothing in the agreement would oblige any NAFTA party to either exploit its water for commercial use, or to begin exporting water in any form.

The difficulty is that the NDP does not understand that there is an agreement to open, as this motion proposes, the—

• (1210)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Order, please. The hon. member for Vancouver Island North.

Ms. Catherine Bell: Mr. Speaker, I am sure the hon. member knows that the parliamentary committee was told by the government's own people that once the export of bulk water starts, foreign investors can sue the Government of Canada if they are denied access to bulk water exports.

I think the member is wrong on many levels in his comments. The NDP does understand what happens with the export of bulk water. Canadians across the country are demanding that the federal government withdraw any talks of bulk water exports from any international trade discussions. They know full well, as does the member, that if we go down this slippery slope and export our bulk water that we will lose control of it. We will lose our sovereignty over bulk water.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague in the NDP on her speech. We both sit on the Standing Committee on Natural Resources and we often have similar views on how important it is to protect our natural resources and manage them well. However, I do not agree with her proposal to establish a national water policy. The NDP has this mania for constantly proposing centralizing policies in areas of provincial jurisdiction. Apart from the legislation that was just mentioned, most water management is a matter of exclusive provincial jurisdiction.

How can the hon. member explain this proposal? Does she not think that her proposal for a national water policy is a 100% infringement on areas of provincial jurisdiction?

[*English*]

Ms. Catherine Bell: Mr. Speaker, my colleague and I do sit on the natural resources committee and her work on environmental issues has been very good and we do share a lot in common on those issues.

However, the one thing that we do not share in common with the Bloc is on the issue of national policy versus provincial policy. The Bloc sees many issues as provincial jurisdiction, whereas we see them as national jurisdiction. Child care is one of them, water is another and environmental regulations, in some respects, is another.

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When her party looks at forest policy as being provincial, I must ask my colleague why, in the face of the softwood lumber deal, her party supported that deal when mills are now closing and jobs are disappearing, not only in Quebec but across the country. Now the Bloc needs to go to the U.S. to change its forest policy. On so many levels, we would be better off with national policies as opposed to provincial policies.

Mr. Jim Abbott (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I came into the House today prepared to do battle, as it were, with the NDP and the idiocy of this particular motion that says that there is a problem and that we must address the problem.

There is no problem. The Government of Canada has absolutely no intention of entering into any agreement. As I said previously, through the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act, the Government of Canada prohibits the bulk removal of water from Canadian boundary water basins, including for the purpose of export.

The federal government's prohibition is both environmentally sound and consistent with Canada's international trade obligations. It builds on sound water management principles and the need to protect the integrity of Canada's watersheds.

The International Joint Commission has commended the Government of Canada for its action to prohibit bulk water removals.

In the case of the North American Free Trade Agreement, Canada, the United States and Mexico clarified, through a joint statement issued on December 2, 1993, that nothing in the agreement would oblige any NAFTA party to either exploit its water for commercial use or to begin exporting water in any form.

Water in its natural state is not a good and hence not subject to trade agreements. Tariff schedules do not define what is a good. They only determine what tariff applies to water that has been transformed into a good, that is bottled water.

The NAFTA has made all three partners more competitive by providing their firms with preferential access to markets and more than 431 million consumers.

An increasingly integrated market has stimulated capital flows, promoted the spread of technology and contributed to increasing productivity, higher wages, lower prices and more choices for consumers.

Canada's merchandise trade with its NAFTA partners has increased 122% since 1993, reaching \$596.7 billion in 2006, accounting for 82.6% of Canada's total merchandise exports. The NAFTA has also had a positive impact on services and investment flows among the three countries.

Again I say to the NDP, on the question as to whether the Government of Canada is preparing to enter into negotiations to export its water into the United States, no. The Government of Canada has no intention of entering into negotiations on bulk water exports.

The NDP members subscribe to the wonderful theories about black helicopters and conspiracies because of a meeting that

occurred somewhere. I think it was in Calgary or some such place. Of all things, the meeting was held behind closed doors and the press was not invited. People actually had a meeting to discuss bringing together the positive forces between Canada, the United States and Mexico under the NAFTA agreement and to bring together the synergism that occurs between those three nations, the economic, security and other issues that are common to those three nations. The NDP members continue to call this a conspiracy because, of all things, the meetings were held behind closed doors. I guess it just comes from the NDP members not having the capacity to ever form the Government of Canada.

The Liberals being the former government and our party being the current government, I do recognize that there are certain restrictions and constraints on any leader of any party that has the most members in the House. I also recognize that there are certain constrictions relating to the cabinet that he or she has chosen to form and the bureaucracy, the Privy Council Office and the Prime Minister's Office. However, that does not preclude any government from making choices as it sees fit to give direction. However, nonetheless, it is constrained by the terms and conditions of the agreements and the international treaties under which previous governments have entered.

● (1215)

Under those constraints, as I have already read, bulk water is not a commodity. It is not a merchandise.

I find it so unfortunate that the sincere and well-meaning people in my constituency, who I have listened to and talked to, are convinced that just because people make speeches, like some of the NDP speeches today in this House of Commons, no matter how badly informed those members are or how devoid of anything approaching fact they are, somehow we must listen.

In the speech by the member who spoke just before the last NDP member, her major concern was the fact that an American think tank said something, whatever it was that was said, and therefore it must be fact. That absolutely underscores my proposition that the conspiracy theory that the NDP are propagating here today is founded on absolutely nothing except fabrications around black helicopters.

If we were to follow, and heaven forbid that we would, what the NDP members are talking about, do they actually believe that when the NAFTA is opened for this issue the other parties that are covered under NAFTA would not open it up for one, two, five, fifty, one hundred or five thousand other amendments that they would want? Of course they would.

The worst thing in the world that could happen with the NAFTA, particularly frivolously, as this motion is, would be to open it up for a frivolous, vexatious, useless, needless motion like this and then open up the entire floodgate of debate, discussion and renegotiation and put us back into morass.

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Whether we like it or not, the fact is that up to 80% of Canada's exports and imports occur under NAFTA. Whether we like that or we do not like that, that is a fact. We are talking about over half a trillion dollars a year of imports and exports. These people, under this motion, would open up a half a trillion dollars a year of trade among our sovereign nations and all the jobs that means and all the issues that means to our joint societies over this frivolous, needless, useless fabrication of an idea.

There is no problem. I would suggest that they might want to take a look at Yogi Berra's axiom, which is, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it".

● (1220)

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary used disingenuousness, bordering on dishonesty. He read a phrase without giving the second part of the sentence. When he said, and it is very true, that water in its natural state is not a good under NAFTA, he left out the second part of the sentence, which is that once it is treated as a good it does fall under NAFTA.

That is the unbelievable attempt by the Conservatives to try to mix up a debate that they clearly do not understand.

This is something that Liberals took no action on, and now we see the Conservatives, in the most disingenuous way possible, trying to pretend that because it is in a natural state now they do not need to worry about the fact that once water exports starts we cannot stop them and foreign investors are actually entitled to compensation from Canadian taxpayers. They clearly do not understand the issue.

They throw around black helicopters, which seems to be an obsession on the Conservative side of the House. I do not understand it and I do not think anyone watching here today would understand it either so I will leave that point aside. However, I will go back to NAFTA.

Statistics Canada says very clearly that since the signing of the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement in 1989, 80% of Canadian families are actually earning less in real terms. Yesterday, thousands of laid off workers who have lost their jobs came before Parliament Hill.

My question is very simple. What is it about the Conservatives that they do not understand simple issues like water exports, job losses and the fact that their economic policies have failed and most Canadian families are doing worse now than they were 18 years ago?

Mr. Jim Abbott: Mr. Speaker, I categorically reject the proposition that Canadians are worse off now than they were previously. I absolutely reject that. That is absolutely stupid.

Maybe I can make clear my reference to black helicopters, which is to conspiracy theories that black helicopters are hovering around all over the place. Conspiracy theories seem to be what fuel the paranoia of that member and his fellow colleagues. There is no conspiracy.

The Government of Canada has made it crystal clear. There is no intention whatsoever to enter into bulk water exports. To go past that point and say if we did, we would end up with it being covered under NAFTA is a leap into an abyss that simply does not exist. There is no intention to enter into any kind of agreement.

As much as I have significant differences between our party, my position and the position of the Liberals, I do not believe for a split second that any national party, with the good of Canadians in mind and having the responsibility of being the government, would ever enter into an agreement like that.

They are talking about fixing something that does not exist all on a whim of this conspiracy idea, and what happens? We open up NAFTA and create all kinds of problems for over half a trillion dollars worth of trade annually. It is absolute lunacy.

● (1225)

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, before I ask my question, believing the conspiracy theory of the NDP is almost like believing the California Golden Seals are going to win the Stanley Cup next week.

I want to ask the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage a question. The previous member from the NDP talked about job losses, water, et cetera. First, those members are really the cause of this because of what they did last time.

Given this is a provincial and federal responsibility and given the member's government has been in power for almost a year and a half and there has not been one meeting with the premiers, could he then consider passing on to the Prime Minister that at least one ministerial meeting be convened with the first ministers of the provinces and the Prime Minister of Canada so they can discuss this issue and lay it to rest, once and for all, that there is no such conspiracy?

Mr. Jim Abbott: Mr. Speaker, I will make every effort to accept the Liberal member's comments in a positive vein. The difficulty being that to gather first ministers together is not an incidental issue. We are talking about many tonnes of carbon in the air from planes that will be flying them and their advisers and I do not know how many tens of thousands of dollars to actually convene a meeting about something that is pure piffle by the NDP. I do not think the member really expects that.

However, I point out that the Prime Minister has an outstanding relationship with all the premiers of this great nation, no matter what their political stripe is. He and they recognize the importance of the fact that we as a government and they as respectively responsible for their provincial legislatures have the same responsibility to their people in their particular constituencies.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I disagree completely with my Conservative colleague. The NDP and the Bloc Québécois are in complete agreement on this question.

Routine Proceedings

However, I would like to read my Conservative colleague a short memo. On October 7, 2005, in a debate about nationalizing water on the Télé-Québec program *Il va y avoir du sport* with Marie-France Bazzo, the Minister of Industry, the Conservative Minister, who was at that time the Vice President of the Montreal Economic Institute, stated that water is a commercial commodity that belongs to no one and that should be subject to the laws of the marketplace like any other product. That was the Minister of Industry who said that. And in his delirium, he went so far as to say that water was in nature and now is in a bottle, and he asked what the difference was.

When a minister of industry says things like that, there are probably grounds for concern. The government decided to have a dissenting opinion when this report was tabled. According to it, the dissent relates to “Bulk Water Removals, Water Exports and the NAFTA”, a document submitted to the committee. It simply chose to “dissent respectfully” from it. On the other hand, that report says—and that is where the member is not making the distinction—that the treaty does not apply to water in its natural state. And any lawyer or legal expert in the world could have a field day with those two words.

The United States is starting to get thirsty. When it gets really thirsty, not just for water for human use, but for water for residential development in the desert, to make huge recreational lakes, and to use for everything imaginable, I think there will truly be a danger. They say if it ain't broke, don't fix it. We might rather say that if it is too strong, it won't break. We have to raise the stakes and exclude water.

• (1230)

[*English*]

Mr. Jim Abbott: Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, as the member would know, I am unfamiliar with the specific comments made by the current Minister of Industry or the context in which they were made.

I can advise him though that what I said previously still stands. We understand the difference between water and water. Water in a pipeline, or in a bulk export or in a diversion is a totally different legal issue than water in a bottle, which is transported back and forth across the border. They are completely separate. The commodity may be the same, but the form it is in makes all the difference in the world.

There is no point in repeating what I have already said. The Government of Canada has no intention of entering into any agreement. I cannot imagine that the Liberals, on their worst day, would even contemplate such a thing. This is a problem that simply does not exist.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to discuss this question and speak in favour of this report.

We have heard a number of arguments in this House. Some reasons were good, others perhaps less so. It must be acknowledged, however, that now, in the agreement with the United States and Mexico, there is no provision for trade in water, but it is also not excluded. It does not say that if one day, whether in 10 or 20 or

50 years, we decide to permit bulk water exports, that will not become a product covered by NAFTA. I therefore consider it to be entirely reasonable for us to discuss the subject in this House.

I was surprised to hear a Bloc member—not the last member who spoke, but the member who spoke earlier—say that this is a matter under provincial jurisdiction, that we should not have this debate at the national level, and that it was a question of drinking water management.

On the contrary—I think that it is in the interests of all the provinces for these discussions to take place. Ontario may suddenly decide, in 20 or 40 or 50 years, to export water from the Great Lakes. That would have not insignificant repercussions on the St. Lawrence, and so on Quebec and the Atlantic, through the Gulf. This is a question that must be debated in Parliament and we must take it seriously.

[*English*]

A few years ago I was driving in the Annapolis Valley with my mother, who was not elderly but advancing a bit in age. It was a very hot day. I went into a grocery store and came out with two bottles of water for each of us.

I asked her what her grandparents and great-grandparents would have thought. They worked so hard in the Annapolis Valley to build the dykes, the sluices to take the water out of the land. I asked her what they would have said if they thought at one point we would be buying water. She said that they might understand that, because water is a necessity of life. She said that she would not want to explain to them about the aisle in the store, which was 100 feet long by 40 feet wide, and the fact that one side was for dogs and the other side was for cats.

The world changes. We could not have predicted 60 years ago that there would have been such a huge market for cat food and that we would sell bottled water in Canada. We also cannot predict what will happen in future provincial or federal governments, whether they will have the desire to export bulk water.

I think it is completely reasonable that we look at the question of the NAFTA and ask, “Should that happen?”. I agree with the member from the Conservative Party who said that nobody now in their right mind would think of that, that it would be a huge mistake.

However, should one province at one point do it for one reason or another, ship a truckload, or boatload, or a cargo load or put a pipe in to answer to an emergency situation in one community of our neighbour to the south, would we at that time be stuck with the position that because of our agreement, NAFTA, we would have to continue those exports, which we turned into a marketable commodity, a good?

I am not an expert in international trade and I do not pretend to be. The question is raised in the community and it creates apprehension. I hear of it often in my community. If we can clear that question, if we can give surety for the future, which is what the report seeks to do, then that would be a reasonable thing to do.

Routine Proceedings

I have a situation now in my riding. We have Digby Neck, a very pristine area, low population, fishing communities, retirees, families who have been there for almost 400 years. It is a beautiful area of nature. Most of the people who live there choose to live there for its intrinsic value. If they wanted economic opportunities, except perhaps for the fishermen, they would be living in the city or other areas. They live there for those values.

Now we have a company that wants to export basalt rock out of that community. It wants to make a huge quarry and mine to export basalt into the U.S. Why would the Americans want to come to Nova Scotia, such a pristine coastal community, where all or most of their eastern seaboard has the exact same topography and geology? It is because they have decided, in their communities, that they would not risk those intrinsic values or diminish their quality of life. Therefore, for their aggregates for road construction, concrete and other things they are looking to Nova Scotia.

There is a huge fear because of the North American free trade agreement. If the province wants to close this first quarry or not permit its expansion and stop the exports to the United States, because of the articles of NAFTA it would be in the situation of lawsuits for economic loss for the American companies. It is a valid concern. In that case, the Liberals, when we were the previous government, struck the joint panel review process. It was the toughest level of environmental scrutiny available to Canadians.

That also brings in the provincial criteria. When we looked at the Canadian level, we know it was purely on the scientific basis, whether it would be hazardous to fish stocks, air or water quality, or done safely within it. Although those questions has not been answered, they would be the federal concerns. Provinces can look at the questions of socio-economic factors. They can look at whether 20 or 40 jobs are worth the loss in quality of life to the remaining residents and the loss to the tourism industry.

Dr. Fournier, a noted oceanographer, is chairing that panel. We hope to see his recommendations soon. Hopefully, it will make the people happy and that the province will play its role.

Those are the difficult questions that come in under NAFTA, but here we are looking at water, which makes it even more visceral and unnerving for people, because it is a huge factor.

• (1235)

We are the guardians of the greatest freshwater resources on the planet, a lot of them in pristine condition, and some of them we have damaged already. This debate is good in that it makes Canadians realize what we have.

We know that to the south of us there is a huge demand. We know that with global warming the demand within Canada is going to increase.

We know that the demands for irrigation in our prairie provinces is going to increase. Anybody who has flown over Alberta and has seen the areas that have been irrigated and the areas that have not, has seen the difference between starvation and life. The future is going to be more in that direction based on what we are hearing about global warming. It is important that we take care of our freshwater resources. It is important also that there be surety.

I would ask the member not to discount it completely based on the situation today. We have to think of how the situation could evolve in the future. This is a matter for reasoned debate. We have had very good debates in the House of Commons this year on questions of legislation brought forward by the government and some by private members dealing with apprehensions in the area of criminality. In some cases the fears were warranted and in some cases the fears were not necessarily warranted. We take action, we have debate and we have considerations. Sometimes a law passes and sometimes it is modified, but it is based on the apprehensions out there.

If we look at the question of minimum sentencing, if we look at the question of mandatory release, all the statistics show us that the crime rate is decreasing. The effect of our criminal justice system in Canada is much better per capita than that in the U.S., but there is a desire by the Conservatives to "toughen" criminality based on reducing criminality. Nothing tells us that that is true, but that perception is out there, that demand by the Canadian public that we have those discussions. We have the discussions, and that is right and correct.

Now we are looking at the question of water. I do not think we can do any less. The member was raising the question of basins, and that is correct. We have the International Joint Commission. We have had very good discussions in those areas, but as time goes by, there are areas outside of those basins that will become important also, because of the possibility of a pipeline, the possibility of transshipments. There are demands. People have wanted to buy some icebergs in the past, put them on ships and sell iceberg water, because there is a market value. It is among the highest quality untreated water that can be bought.

We cannot neglect these questions. We have to have a serious look at them. If we look around the world and see what water is, the proper management and the proper dialogue among neighbouring states is often the difference between war and peace, whether we can properly use the water and properly protect it.

I encourage the bottling and exporting of bottled water. We see Perrier water being sold in Canada. Why could we not be selling Montclair in the United States and other areas? I encourage that. They are value added. It creates a lot of jobs in Canada and creates water now. If we look at the average bottle of water in the grocery store, people are paying more for it than they are paying for milk or fuel. A litre of water most times costs more than a litre of gasoline.

It is a renewable resource and it should be managed that way. It should be managed properly. We should know that in the future our kids in this country will have the benefit of the resource that we have had and that we will continue to have.

That being said, I rise in support of this motion. I thank members of the committee for bringing this discussion forward to the House of Commons where it belongs, because it is a matter of national importance.

Routine Proceedings

•(1240)

Mr. Jim Abbott (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I guess I am going to have to take back my feeling that the Liberals would not possibly support this motion on the worst day. This must be one of their worst days. I suggested to some of my friends on the other side that when they moved from this side of the House to the other side of the House they must have had lobotomies if they are going to be supporting this motion.

I put it very directly to the member that as a former cabinet minister, surely he would be able to answer this question. If we were to propose to the United States and Mexico that we open the NAFTA this one time for this one issue, does he not realize that by asking to open the NAFTA, it would open all of the NAFTA? Does he realize that we would be putting \$600 billion a year of trade between us and the United States at risk by doing so?

Surely as a former cabinet minister, I would anticipate his answer to be in the affirmative, that in fact by supporting this silly, frivolous motion and opening the NAFTA, we would be putting our trade at risk, because it would open up all parts of the NAFTA. Is that not correct?

•(1245)

Hon. Robert Thibault: Mr. Speaker, I believe that to be false. The recommendation is quite clear. It says:

That the Standing Committee recommend that the government quickly begin talks with its American and Mexican counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA.

If that statement said that at all costs reach an agreement, the member would be correct, but it says “recommend that the government quickly begin talks...to exclude water”.

The member pointed out earlier that there was an exchange of official letters by the three partners in 1993, stating that covering bulk water was not the intent of NAFTA. My feeling is that what we are looking at here is clarification for the future.

Again I point out that I am not an expert in international trade. The suggestion is out there; there is that apprehension in Canada. I am sure it is there in the other countries that should ever any trade of that nature happen, that bulk water becomes a good or a commodity and therefore is captured by NAFTA, the three partners within NAFTA have already stated that it was not the intent. In my mind, all that the recommendation does is ask the three partners to clarify that, to make sure that we have surety for the future.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, contrary to the previous questioner, I do not think anything in the report suggests that we have taken leave of our senses.

I do not know what the hon. member has against “Canada's water resources must be protected”. It seems like a self-evident statement. And “NAFTA covers all goods, except those that are expressly excluded” and water is not excluded. That seems like an interesting point. “Whereas this situation puts the provincial and federal laws concerning the protection of water including the prohibition of bulk water exports at risk” seems a reasonable conclusion from the previous statement. “Whereas a simple agreement by exchange of letters” may not cover the entire situation, “the standing committee

recommend that the government quickly begin talks with its American and Mexican counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA”.

I cannot quite fathom why the committee of all three opposition parties has therefore taken leave of its senses to propose what appears to be a straightforward and clarifying recommendation. Would the hon. member comment on that?

Hon. Robert Thibault: Mr. Speaker, one must put this in context. This is not a private member's bill that puts legislation forward, puts articles forward or possible legislation, this is a recommendation to the Government of Canada that it put in writing in the agreement what it already has done through an exchange of letters, to “legitimize” it, I think might be the closest word that I can come up with immediately. It has been stated that that is the desire. The desire is that water not fall under NAFTA and the exchange of letters said that.

The open-ended question remains, if there is some trading at one point or another for whatever reason, does bulk water then get captured by NAFTA under the heading of a good and it becomes a marketable and a commercial good? At that point it would be because the exchange of letters refers to water in its natural state. I believe that was an error at that time. I would not think that the Government of Canada would not have wanted to go further and make sure that it covered bulk water. All this motion is doing is inviting the Government of Canada to enter into those discussions, not to reopen NAFTA, although I would dearly love it if we did have some discussion around NAFTA.

We saw in the free trade agreement where it cost us a billion dollars to capitulate and now we see the trouble that we are having in the industry. There is a risk of being challenged again by the American side. NAFTA is not perfect. There is no reason that we should shy away from having some discussions with our partners in a trade agreement at any time.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, standing here among the supposed conspiracy theorists of this party, I look upon what the hon. member for Kootenay—Columbia is talking about. He is saying that the sky is falling, that we cannot discuss anything about our trade agreement because it will throw it all open and catastrophe will strike us, that we will be slowed down in our trade deals, leaving the Canadian people homeless and hapless. That kind of rhetoric does not work in this Parliament. It does not work to call us conspiracy theorists either.

I had the opportunity to speak to an environment assessment panel on liquefied natural gas in Quebec. We raised the point about proportionality and the fact that it was not understood how this works in Canada. The chairman agreed with me. He said that we would have to make a ruling on this because it has not been done. That was the third environmental assessment on liquefied natural gas in Canada. We are taking a product into Canada and we still do not know how it affects our trade deals.

Why should we not be dealing with the issues in Canada that affect us, whether they are attached to trade deals or not?

When it comes to water, Canadians want answers about how these trade deals affect our water supply and the future of our lakes and rivers. Let us get on with it.

Routine Proceedings

Does my hon. colleague agree that this is what the recommendation is about and it is not about causing a catastrophe in the Canadian trade system?

• (1250)

Hon. Robert Thibault: Mr. Speaker, I fully agree that this is a question of clarity. It is a question of clarifying what has been the stated intention.

Looking at the oil and gas industry, we have the Sable oil and gas field off Nova Scotia. We developed it fully knowing that the bulk of the exports would go to the U.S.

We are on the North American energy grid. What happens in energy in one country has an impact on the other country, similar pricing, similar distribution and those problems. We did it with open eyes. We knew it was within NAFTA. Whether the decision was right or wrong, that is the decision that was made. We want to be 100% sure that we do not do the same thing with water.

If at some point there is a shortage of natural gas and there is a little bit left on Sable Island, we will get the same proportion we are getting now of what is being exported, and the rest we will have to share with the Americans or our partners within NAFTA.

I would never like to see that situation happen with water, because water is a mainstay necessity of life. We are the guardians of the largest freshwater resource in the world. It is important for this planet that we manage that resource properly and that we do not get it caught up unintentionally in some international trade deal.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise and speak to the motion by my colleague from Sherbrooke. I wish to inform you that I will be sharing my time with the member for Berthier—Maskinongé.

I wish to thank the member for Sherbrooke and congratulate him for having proposed this motion to the Standing Committee on International Trade. I can tell you in plain words that he did not have it easy, because the Conservative members on the committee played the strategy game in order to delay the adoption of the motion.

This brings back some strange, though not so distant, memories: I found myself in the same situation in the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, when the Conservatives joined forces with the chair to delay the adoption of the report following up on the Alberta tar sands study. We can see that these techniques are still going on, and are spreading, in order to avoid debates in the House.

Do you want to tell me what advantages it gives the Conservatives to avoid debates in the House of Commons on subjects as important as the tar sands, and today the export of water? They have to tell me what is in it for them to avoid debates on this question?

Since this morning, I have listened to all the speeches by members of all the parties. Each time I am surprised by the arrogance and contempt of certain Conservative members, who practically call their colleagues “paranoid”—that is a loose translation.

When I learned on April 27 that lobbyists, business people, intellectuals from Mexico, Canada and the United States were

holding a sixth meeting to discuss the continental nature of natural resources, it was quite natural for citizens of Quebec and Canada to become suddenly concerned and to alert their MPs. Indeed our role as members is to inform and report on the questions and concerns of our citizens in the House of Commons.

Earlier I heard the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage trivialize the April 27 meeting. This meeting was held behind closed doors, secretly, away from the general public and the media, so that the public could not take part in this important debate. He trivialized this meeting, and I think it was a mistake to do so. All meetings by major lobby groups on topics as important and crucial as this one for our society must be brought to light. I was disturbed by the oil company lobby, when we did the tar sands study. I saw how much power they have to influence the government and Canada’s various elected representatives. I cannot help but see similarities, and I understand people’s concern.

This is not only of concern to parliamentarians. I have received letters from people from my riding and the ridings of many members from the Bloc Québécois. The Canadian Council, the S.O.S. Water Coalition and one of the most important central labour body in Quebec have also expressed concern. Speaking of the Canadian Council, this is not a bunch of volunteers who do not know what they are talking about. We are talking about a political economist from the University of Alberta, who is also the director of the Parkland Institute. We are talking about Steven Shrybman, who is practising international commercial law in Ottawa, and Ms. Louise Vandellac, a renowned researcher in Quebec. We are talking about people, scientists, researchers and citizens who are concerned because NAFTA does not currently exclude the possibility of water ever becoming an exportable, marketable commodity.

Where there is doubt, it is only natural to want to dissipate it. All that is asked of the government is that it open negotiations to exclude water from NAFTA. Of course, we have heard about the agreements entered into by Mexico, Canada and the United States in 1993, which have enshrined the principle that water ought not be exported in bulk.

• (1255)

However, 1993 was 14 years ago and, at that time, we did not know as much about climate change as we do today. We can expect—it has actually been documented—water shortages, particularly in the United States, to hit hard in coming years.

We, the public and the various organizations advocating on this issue, fear that the shortage of water they might experience could drive our neighbours to the South to challenge the agreements which currently protect against bulk water export. As parliamentarians, it is our duty to prevent a potential challenge on this issue in the future and it is also our duty to protect our resource.

Frankly, I cannot understand why the Conservative government stubbornly refuses to listen to different points of view. It is so closed-minded and standing so firm, while many scientific witnesses now have doubts.

Routine Proceedings

I should point out that NAFTA is a free trade agreement which includes all goods and services without specifically excluding water. Article 309 of NAFTA reads, and I quote:

—no Party may adopt or maintain any prohibition or restriction on the importation of any good of another Party or on the exportation or sale for export of any good destined for the territory of another Party—

Clearly, Quebec and provincial legislation, which currently prohibits the export of water in bulk, constitutes a prohibition or restriction on the export or sale for export, prohibited by NAFTA.

As long as water is not excluded from NAFTA, our legislation prohibiting the export of water could be challenged or even quashed. Thus, some risk and doubt remains. We believe that, above all, it must not be underestimated. We must therefore assume our responsibilities and begin talks with Mexico and the United States to have it excluded.

In the debates here in the House, we hear some dubious statements. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage told us earlier that reopening NAFTA would be the worst thing in the world. It is not a question of entering into negotiations to open NAFTA and renegotiating the entire agreement from beginning to end, but rather, of allowing for the addition or even a clarification on the matter before us here today, namely, excluding water.

If everyone finds this so obvious, why are we hesitating to remove it? In response to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, I would like to inform him that, on March 24, 2006, the Government of Canada found a way to amend NAFTA through a simple exchange of letters, to clarify the definition of certain products covered by the agreement.

How is it possible that we can clarify a definition in NAFTA with a simple letter, but that we cannot clarify this issue and exclude water from the agreement?

I strongly urge the Conservative members to reconsider their position and, as called for by Quebecers and Canadians, quickly begin talks with our Mexican and American counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA.

• (1300)

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague for her excellent speech and for having addressed the important reasons our colleague from Sherbrooke put forward this motion.

Could my colleague tell me, if the current government is against clarifying this in NAFTA, is it because it has perhaps already concluded agreements, particularly trade agreements, with the Americans? I would like to hear more about trade, because it seems as though they have now decided to purchase all the oil produced by the oil sands, while Canadians get theirs elsewhere.

Could my colleague tell me whether there could very well be informal agreements for them to purchase our oil in exchange for our water?

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Brome—Missisquoi for his question.

We spent three months taking a very careful look at the oil sands and what we saw leaves us to conclude that it is entirely possible that there are informal negotiations going on.

We often hear about the water shortage in the United States. But it is not about providing Americans with drinking water. The Americans have a growing need for water for industrial and agricultural production. Domestic consumption is barely 8%. We think that the Americans will need water to be able to meet the requirements of their industrial, energy and agricultural sectors. That is a problem.

If we do not exclude water from NAFTA, will we let the Americans challenge NAFTA and come take our water, so that they will be able to further their economic development and provide water to their industries and agricultural businesses?

• (1305)

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for participating in this very important debate.

I would like to ask her a question in light of the comments made a little earlier by the Conservative member. Terence Corcoran of the *National Post* enthusiastically predicted that in 10 years we will have a cartel based on the OPEC model and that Canada will export considerable amounts of water to the United States.

What does she think of the Conservatives' statements that the problem does not exist and that we will not be exporting our water? They are turning a blind eye to the U.S. desire to one day draw from our reserves. I would like to hear my colleague's comments on this.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague, the member for Sherbrooke, for his question.

It is important to realize that there have already been attempts by different businesses to export and market water. In each case it was not a profitable operation. Water is the future and is Quebec's and Canada's blue gold. When the shortage eventually makes itself felt, when we really need water, when our neighbours to the south also really need it, will it not be too late to protect ourselves and to stop it from being taken away? The deepest pockets will prevail. If the Americans want our water, they will find a way—as they did with softwood lumber—to challenge the agreements of Quebec and the other provinces and to obtain bulk water to export for their use.

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity today to speak on the ninth report of the Standing Committee on International Trade.

This report, tabled by my colleague the member for Sherbrooke, a member of the Standing Committee on International Trade, recommends that the federal government:

quickly begin talks with its American and Mexican counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA.

The reason the Bloc Québécois has proposed this motion is that we are determined to ensure that Quebec's fresh water reserves and those of Canada never become the subject of bargaining and will not be sold to the United States, where the need for water is becoming more and more urgent. We are under pressure now from some American states that want water.

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Before explaining our motion in more detail, I want to emphasize that in committee the Bloc Québécois received the support of the NDP and the Liberal Party, at least, we hope it is still there. However, we did not receive the support of the Conservative Party, which used all kinds of manoeuvres to try to sidetrack or derail the debate. The Conservatives even tried to delay adoption of the motion by all sorts of procedural strategies that bring shame on democracy. They have done the same with other motions in many other committees, as my colleague from Beauharnois—Salaberry pointed out, including the Standing Committee on Natural Resources.

I must confess that it is rather disturbing to see the Conservatives using these partisan procedures with respect to a subject as important as water management. The reason we have proposed this motion is that we want to ensure that this vital natural resource is protected. For a number of years, more and more serious thinkers and economic decision makers from Quebec, Canada, the United States and Mexico have been meeting to discuss water exports. This is known as the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, which is made up of Canada, the United States and Mexico. Other countries are beginning to covet our water. Several bulk water export projects have been developed in recent years, and other projects are now on the drawing board. All of these projects have been abandoned or will not be realized because they simply are not profitable. It is easy to believe today that the value of water will increase considerably when shortages become more serious and the pressure increases. The companies that are interested in exporting water will come forward with proposals for new projects. Economic issues will not even be a concern at that point.

The Conservatives say there is no question of exporting water. However, water scarcities among our neighbours to the south are appearing now as an increasingly important subject of negotiations. The importance of this motion becomes fully apparent in connection with NAFTA. We should remember that NAFTA is a free trade agreement applying to all goods and services unless they are explicitly excluded. For example, NAFTA does not apply to hydroelectricity generation or to products subject to supply management. They are explicitly excluded from the agreement. However, nothing in writing states that water is excluded. This means, therefore, that it is included under NAFTA. If it is not explicitly excluded, it is included.

It is important to know that this situation, which falls under federal responsibility, poses a danger to the provincial legislation currently prohibiting the exportation of water. Quebec prohibits exports of this kind. Water is under provincial jurisdiction in Canada. Quebec and eight other provinces have legislation prohibiting the exportation of bulk water. We want to preserve this valuable natural resource.

• (1310)

If water becomes a key issue in the United States and they are prepared to make a national security issue of it, it is easy to imagine the laws of Quebec and the provinces being challenged under NAFTA.

The Americans are going to want to bargain over water, and in return, they will lean on another free trade or export issue. They will bring pressure to bear on our economy and companies. We saw what

happened in the softwood lumber issue. When the Americans put on the pressure to get something, they often get what they want.

Section 309 of the agreement states:

No Party may adopt or maintain any prohibition or restriction on the importation of any good of another Party—

The laws of Quebec and the provinces protecting water and preventing bulk water exports would apparently constitute a prohibition or restriction on the exportation or sale for export, as prohibited by NAFTA.

So long as water is not excluded from NAFTA, our legislation forbidding water exports can be challenged and possibly struck down.

Even though water is within Quebec's jurisdiction, international trade is always under federal jurisdiction. Free trade agreements are currently under federal jurisdiction.

We want the government to assume its responsibilities and immediately launch discussions with its NAFTA partners aimed at specifying in an accord that water is not included in NAFTA. This accord could take the form of a simple understanding—an exchange of letters among the three governments—stating that water is not included in NAFTA. This understanding would have to be viewed by international courts as an integral part of NAFTA.

The Conservative Party even tried to sabotage the work of the committee and prevent a witness from sharing his views on this issue. I suppose the Conservative chair of the committee did a good job of reading his manual on how to sow chaos and avoid dealing with subjects that do not suit the government. That is what he did to our committee when we introduced this motion on water.

It was in 1999 that the Bloc Québécois first asked the federal government to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA. The response from the government, whether Liberal or Conservative, has always been the same: it is pointless to exclude water from NAFTA because water, in its natural state, is not governed by NAFTA. Of course water in its natural state is not governed by NAFTA. In fact, no product in its natural state is governed by NAFTA or any other trade agreement. Since the Liberals already used this ridiculous argument, the Conservatives should have at least found another kind of sophistry to explain their opposition.

The Conservatives clearly do not have enough imagination to hide their inconsistency. Many seem to have grasped the fact that the Americans are not interested in water in its natural state. What they want is to take it south of the border. That water would no longer be in its natural state and would therefore be subject to NAFTA, as a commodity. That is precisely our fear.

To use the government's own examples, who would dare say that lumber, iron or fish are excluded from the scope of trade agreements? That is precisely what the government is saying with its ridiculous argument.

Water is a natural resource that must be closely and carefully protected. That cannot be negotiable.

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We are calling on the Conservative government to stop repeating its arguments intended to mislead Canadians and take action to reach an agreement that clearly excludes water from NAFTA.

• (1315)

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Zed: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Discussions have taken place among some members and parties with respect to Bill C-440, An Act to amend the Canada Post Corporation Act (mail free of postage to members of the Canadian Forces), which was introduced in the House of Commons on May 8.

I believe that if you were to seek it, you would find consent for the following motion: That notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practice of the House, Bill C-440 be deemed to have been read a second time, referred to a committee of the whole, reported without amendment, concurred in at report stage, and read a third time and passed.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to move the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: Sorry, there is no unanimous consent.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Brome—Missisquoi.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I wish to commend my hon. colleague for his very clear presentation. We can see that he is really on top of the matter.

The current government seems to be lacking wisdom. Should the government ever give in on that, it would not make it through NAFTA.

How could it be that nationalizing water would become a government's only recourse? Also, could anyone imagine a Conservative government nationalizing water? I would very much like my hon. colleague to enlighten us about this issue.

Mr. Guy André: Mr. Speaker, this is an excellent question. Natural resource protection issues and environmental issues are not the forte of the ruling Conservative Party. If we look at the whole issue of oil sands development, we can see that, for this kind of right wing government, economic considerations take precedence over any social or environmental ones.

The concern Quebecers have right now, a concern shared by my hon. colleague, which prompted him to put this motion forward, is that, in a context of trade relations between Canada and the United States under NAFTA, economic considerations take precedence over protecting our water resource and, more basically, ensuring our own survival. Water is essential to human survival and should under no consideration be treated as a commodity. That is what prompted this motion.

• (1320)

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to this important motion by the Bloc Québécois, because it seems to me that the Conservatives are

completely devoid of vision at present. People are always saying that the Americans will need water and will take ours, as if they were sure we will still have as much water as we do today.

With climate change, there is no doubt that we are going to have our own water problems. How can we not protect what water we are going to have in a generation or two? Climate change is expected to produce colder winters, which means that more snow will fall at the two poles. Since the air will be more humid, this snow will not help fill the water basins on the continent because, in any event, they will be at the centre of the poles and the icebergs will melt into the sea. Consequently, more snow at the poles will not mean more fresh water, unless we go out and get it in boats. Maybe we could let the Americans do that.

I would like to read a few short passages in English about how climate change affects water.

[*English*]

“Global warming increases the chances for extreme weather events”.

[*Translation*]

We all agree with that.

[*English*]

It goes on to state: “Here is how. As it gets hotter, summer heat waves become longer, hotter and more widespread. Dry areas tend to dry out faster and to stay that way for longer periods. The extra heat puts more water in the atmosphere”.

[*Translation*]

This is the most important point. With hotter weather, the air will be more humid than it is now. That will cause high winds.

[*English*]

The author states:

—that causes wet areas to become wetter and annual rainfall to become more intense, which, coupled with earlier snowmelt, leads to more flooding.

[*Translation*]

The operative word here is “flooding”. You are well aware that when there are high winds during very hot weather, when the air is humid, that there is a high risk of violent thunderstorms and even hurricanes.

There will be downpours and the water will not be soaked up. Instead, it will quickly flow toward the sea and carry soil and so forth with it.

Accordingly, the following phenomenon will occur: our lakes will not have enough water. Furthermore, in northern Quebec, for the past decade or so, there has been less water in these big areas because rainfall has become increasingly isolated. This phenomenon is not unique to Quebec; it is happening in Europe, where water reservoirs are emptying out because water keeps falling on the same area.

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This means that when climate change increases the average temperature by two or three degrees Celsius, there will be more water in the air and that water will fall on the same area, meaning there will be less water on the land in general.

• (1325)

[English]

The author states that four factors that can affect the intensity of hurricanes and large storms, including “atmospheric humidity” and “wind shear”.

[Translation]

The term wind shear refers to high winds that cause the humidity in the air to suddenly precipitate in the form of a downpour. We will no longer have the same pattern we have now: we are going to end up with great quantities of water in some places and completely empty lakes in other places.

We are developing forms of energy that will require more water. More specifically, we are currently in the process of developing biofuels that should be called “agro-fuels” because they have nothing to do with life. The prefix “bio” means “life”. Agro-fuels will require a phenomenal amount of water in the fields for cultivation. This water will also evaporate into the atmosphere. The more we cultivate the land, the more humidity there will be in the air.

We are also talking about hydrogen, which the Americans are leaning toward. This piques the interest of our Conservative friends because the Americans are taking interest in it. The production of hydrogen requires a tremendous amount of water. If we turn towards these sources of energy, we too will run out of water. In such a context, how could we imagine exporting our water to another country, namely the United States?

In fact, considering the length of the border between Canada and the United States, if we export water, this would occur across the country and we would therefore quickly run out of water, especially since there will be less of it.

Within the next few years, when the Americans decide to draw more water, whether it is for industrial or other systems, they will go and get that water in the Great Lakes, from their side of the border. We are not talking about exporting: the Americans will simply take the water from the Great Lakes and empty them in the process. Within a few years, the Great Lakes will be empty. Can we imagine the St. Lawrence River here without water in it? This means the water will come from the Outaouais region. Thank goodness Ottawa will be there to provide a bit of water to Montreal. This will be the only source of water. We will already be experiencing a water shortage. How can we possibly believe that we can sell it to another country? That is unthinkable.

Instead, we should consider that climate change is the most important factor to take into account in order to conserve our water, and we should immediately do something about it, while also protecting the water that we have by excluding it from NAFTA agreements. These facts are indisputable. Climate change is occurring right now and it will have a direct impact on our own volume of water. Our beautiful lakes in northern Ontario, Quebec and the other provinces will not remain intact. Believe me, things will change. Some areas will have so much water that the excess

volume will end up in the ocean, while lakes in other places will be almost empty, if not totally empty. That is confirmed by some studies.

[English]

The author states:

Global warming also increases the incidence of such heatwaves and makes them more intense and long-lasting. And it puts into the atmosphere more warm, moist air....

[Translation]

That is exactly what is going to happen. Indeed, the more there is —

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sorry, but it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put the question necessary to dispose of the motion before the House.

Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

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

Some hon. members: Yea.

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

Some hon. members: Nay.

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

And five or more members having risen:

The Deputy Speaker: Call in the members.

• (1330)

[English]

And the bells having rung:

The Deputy Speaker: There has been a request that the vote be deferred until the end of orders of the day on June 4. The request is in order. The vote is so deferred.

* * *

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, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Deputy Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

*Government Orders***GOVERNMENT ORDERS***[English]***CANADA ELECTIONS ACT**

The House resumed from May 30 consideration of the motion that Bill C-55, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (expanded voting opportunities) and to make a consequential amendment to the Referendum Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand in the chamber today to speak in favour of Bill C-55 on enhanced voting opportunities. I am hopeful that all of my colleagues in this place will also vote in favour of the bill when it finally comes before the members.

I am sure that I am not alone when I say that during the last couple of federal campaigns I have had opportunities to speak many times before young people, whether it be in primary schools, high schools or universities. One of the things I always say to these young people is that I sincerely hope, no matter for whom they choose to vote, that they at least exercise their franchise and use the ability and the privilege given to them to actually cast their ballots in a federal election.

One of the most disturbing trends that I have seen over the course of the last 10 to 20 years is the decrease in voter turnout, especially among young people, particularly in the 18 to 25 demographic. What I say to these young people and what I will say to the members of this place is that why this is so disturbing is that eventually those young people will be determining the fate of their governments. I would hate to think that if these trends continue we would see a time when a federal election was held with a less than 50% voter turnout, or in other words, when less than 50% of the eligible voters of this country actually would elect a government.

Regardless of which government it is and regardless of which party or political stripe is represented, it is a very disturbing trend to think that young people in particular, but all voters regardless of age, are exercising their franchise less and less. That says perhaps many things about the inherent problems that we have within our political parties, our political system or our electoral system, but nonetheless, it is incumbent upon all of us to do what we can to try to increase voter turnout.

Regardless of the government that is elected at the end of the day, I would feel more comfortable, and I think most Canadians would feel more comfortable, if 80% or 90% of all eligible voters cast their ballots. Then one actually could say that the vast majority of Canadians expressed their opinion, cast their ballots and elected a government in which the majority of Canadians had a say.

I am disturbed when I think that roughly 60% of Canadians, and only 60%, end up electing governments. Whether they be minority or whether they be majority, if only 60% of Canadians feel it is worthwhile to go out on voting day to cast their ballots, it says there is something wrong.

I am not here to speak to all of the ills that currently may be within our electoral system or our political parties, but I am here today to speak to Bill C-55, which is an attempt to increase the voter turnout at future federal elections. While I will be the first to admit that the bill is certainly not intended to be the panacea for all the ills, I think it is a step in the right direction.

Should the bill be passed into law, I believe that it will have a positive impact on increasing the level of voter turnout that we have seen. It may not dramatically increase the level of voter turnout, but I think there will be an increase. Even if we increase the number of voters casting ballots by a few percentage points, the bill will have had a positive effect. That is why I will very gladly and wholeheartedly vote in favour of the bill.

What does the bill say exactly? What does it do? It does not do much outside of the fact that it gives two additional days for voters to cast ballots in advance polls.

Currently, as I am sure most members understand, the situation is that on day ten, nine and seven, in other words the tenth day, the ninth day and the seventh day prior to election day, advance polls are currently in operation, where voters who may not be in town or who may not wish to vote during election day can, during prescribed hours, go to prescribed voting locations, advance poll locations, and cast their ballots. Over time that has proven to be a very valuable tool in assisting all Canadians in their ability to cast a vote.

• (1335)

We all know that come election day certain factors occur which prevent some Canadians from going to the polls. It might be work related functions, the voters may be out of the country on vacation, they may just happen to come down with a bad cold, or some other circumstance might prevent them from actually casting a ballot on E day, election day. Being given the opportunity to cast an advance ballot would ensure that those votes are counted. This bill would increase the number of opportunities that voters would have to actually cast a ballot should they choose to do so other than on election day.

This bill specifically deals with voting on the two Sundays immediately prior to election day. There is one slight variance in that in as much as on the eighth day prior to E day, the Sunday which would be the eighth day prior to E day, the polling location for this advance poll would be the standard advance poll location.

As most Canadians understand, advance polls are traditionally always located in different areas than the general polling location in individual ridings. My particular riding of Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, which is consistent with the geographic area of most rural ridings, is a very large riding. The advance polls for the rural areas in my riding are all held in a community called Lumsden. Lumsden is fairly central, but it is a fair hike for one coming down from Nokomis or Davidson. People sometimes have to travel over an hour, sometimes an hour and a half, to get to the polling station to cast an advance ballot. That in itself poses some difficulties for individuals who may be somewhat restricted in mode of transportation, whether or not they can drive a car, or whether they have access to a ride to get to the polling stations. Even though they have an opportunity to cast a ballot, it is somewhat restrictive in as much as some people have to travel up to an hour and a half or longer.

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Bill C-55 proposes that in addition to allowing advance polls to be open the eighth day prior to E day in the traditional advance polling location, advance polls would be set up the Sunday immediately prior to the general election, which traditionally has been on a Monday. That advance poll, which would be open from 12 noon to 8 p.m. local time, would be located in the general polling location.

Let me explain exactly what that means. On election day, there are many polling locations throughout each member's riding. Perhaps in some riding there might be as many as 30, 40 or 50 actual polling locations located in schools, gymnasiums and churches. This bill proposes that the advance poll for that Sunday, that one day only, one day prior to an election, would be located in the same polling locations as would be held the following day.

In other words, rather than just having one or two advance poll locations, which would require some individuals to drive an hour or more, they would have the convenience of going to a polling station the Sunday prior to the general election and located relatively near their residence. The intent is to give as much flexibility as possible in order to give individuals an opportunity to cast a ballot.

There have been some questions. Why Sunday? Is Sunday not supposed to be a day of rest? Would that not interfere with the practices of some to attend the church of their choice? There may be some validity to that argument, however, I would suggest that since we are recommending that the time of the advance polling would be from 12 noon to 8 p.m. of that day, then that would probably give sufficient time to those who wish to worship at the location of their choice. They would have time to go to church and after that go to the polling location.

I would also suggest that this is not something radical. It is certainly not something new. Other jurisdictions have been providing polling opportunities on a Sunday.

• (1340)

I know my colleagues in the Bloc have long argued that Sunday voting was something that was accepted widely and broadly in Quebec. Other provinces, such as Saskatchewan, have had opportunities on Sundays to cast ballots.

I think that we would find that generally speaking, this has been a practice that has been accepted in other parts of Canada by other Canadians. I would suggest to members of the House that the practice on a widespread basis through all of the ridings would also come under much acceptance.

What does it mean that we have an eight hour window on the Sunday prior? Some would argue that is just merely another extension of voting day, and while I can understand why some individuals would say it is actually adding an extra day, so there would now be two days of voting, it is not quite true.

Number one, the polling hours are different. As I mentioned earlier, the polling is going to be from 12 noon until 8 p.m., whereas on the Monday, the day of a general election, polling stations open on a staggered basis, usually from 9 a.m. until 8 p.m., sometimes 9 p.m., but the times are staggered across Canada to take into account the various time zones. That is the first difference.

The second difference of course is that these are advance polls only. Ballots would not be counted that day. The ballots would be sealed and contained in the advance poll ballot box, referred to the returning officer at the general polling station the following day, and ballots would be counted at that time.

I should also point out that should the eventuality ever occur that the Monday is not election day, it would still be a Sunday prior to the general election day that this special advance poll would be in operation. There are some distinct differences between the two.

However once again, the general intent of this bill is to try to increase the ability of voters to cast ballots during a general election. I would like to think that all parliamentarians, regardless of political affiliation, would agree with me that that is a good thing. I have yet to hear an argument from any member in this place that suggests lower voter turnouts are better for democracy. It is an absurd argument and I think everyone would agree with that. Everything that we can possibly do to increase voter turnout is something we should welcome.

I have heard today that there have been some minor disagreements with this proposed legislation. Some members have argued that it needs improvement.

Perhaps, but on a general basis, on balance, this bill is an improvement to the current voting system that we experience today because it gives additional opportunities to all Canadians to express their opinions and exercise their franchise. It gives them the opportunity in a way that is intended to drive up the number of people who vote.

Can we do other things? Absolutely, and I have long argued that what we need to do, and perhaps this is a function of the Chief Electoral Office of this land, is have a far more aggressive and pervasive educational program to encourage all Canadians, particularly young people, vote.

This is without question, in my view, the most important privilege that every Canadian has, the right to exercise their franchise and to elect members of Parliament, and on a provincial basis, to elect provincial governments.

There is no fundamental democracy or democratic premise or tenet more important, in my view, than the right to vote. Canadians, and in fact citizens worldwide, have long fought, sometimes literally fought, for the right to vote. We still see now in some jurisdictions across the globe a discrimination against some people having the ability to vote.

In this country, of course, not that many years ago there were restrictions placed upon who could vote. We have come a long way in the last century, and that is a good thing, but we still need to do more. Through methods of education and awareness, whether it be in the schoolroom, whether it be through the Chief Electoral Office, or whether it just be us as parliamentarians advocating and encouraging Canadians in our ridings to get out and vote, regardless of who they vote for, it is something we should all take very seriously.

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•(1345)

Again, let me say that while I do not think that this is the total answer, a complete panacea to the problems of low voter turnout, I think it will go in an incremental way toward increasing the level of voter turnout.

I would like nothing more than to be able to come back to this House, some day in the future after this bill has been implemented, and point to the fact that the percentage of voters who attended the Sunday polling stations on day eight and day one prior to election day was significant and the overall voter turnout across this country was significant. We would be able to turn to this bill that we passed, and I hope it will pass unanimously, quite frankly, and say that we had a part to play in allowing more Canadians to vote, in fact in encouraging more Canadians to vote.

If we do that I think all of us can go back to our ridings and say, “I earned my dollar today. I earned my salary”. It may be a small blip on the political landscape that people look back after years and say, “That was an obvious thing to do”. I think these are the type of initiatives as parliamentarians we need to engage in on a more frequent basis.

I certainly encourage every member of this House, when Bill C-55 come before them for third and final reading, and I am sure it will in due course, to vote in favour of the bill.

Once the bill gets to committee, and I am quite confident that it will, should the procedure and House affairs committee dealing with this bill feel or deem that there are any necessary amendments to be made, I have no problems and no qualms with amendments to this bill should they be in the spirit in which the bill was introduced and that is to genuinely put procedures in place that will increase the level of voter turnout.

There may be some amendments that I have not considered and perhaps there may be some amendments offered that this bill has not contemplated. Regardless of that, I think the spirit of this bill is one which all parliamentarians can agree upon.

We need more people in this country to vote. I will give a quick example. In my riding in 2004 just over 63% of eligible voters cast a ballot. When we have 37% of the people not voting, that concerns me, particularly since I will be representing them, regardless of whether they cast a ballot or not.

I would love to say that 100% of the people in my riding voted. Therefore, I would be absolutely convinced, whoever the successful candidate was, that this was really the person who my constituents wanted to see in Parliament representing them.

Right now there certainly can be an argument to be made that I did not receive 50% of the vote and only 63% of the people participated in the vote. One could certainly argue that the majority of people, perhaps even the vast majority in my own riding, did not want me as their member of Parliament but they got me. I would like to think that is not true. I mean that is an argument that could be made and with some legitimacy.

If we can do anything in our power to increase the number of people casting their votes, it will be a good day for democracy.

I go back to 2006. I was hoping that the level of voter turnout would actually increase from the previous election due to the fact that we had many issues that were coming forward during the election campaign. Generally speaking it has always been a historical fact that when there is a change in government, traditionally voter turnout goes up because people want a change. Therefore, they will take the time to go to the polls and vote for a new government.

Quite frankly, that did not occur in the 2006 election. I know that the voter turnout percentages vary from riding to riding, but as a general rule of thumb the voting turnout in 2006 remained fairly static to what it was in 2004, around the low 60% mark.

If we can say that at best we remained the same, that we have not continued to decrease, I do not think that is good enough.

In summary, this bill is a very simple bill. It merely purports to try and do one thing, to allow more people to cast their ballots and to encourage more people to cast their ballots. If we are successful in that initiative by the passage of this bill, it has been a good day for democracy.

•(1350)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have listened to my colleague's speech with interest and I will say immediately that the Bloc Québécois will vote in favour of this bill at second reading, even if we do not think that it will increase voter turnout. It will give people more days to vote, and this is acceptable and desirable. We ourselves would have preferred to see measures that would increase the number of advance polling stations in each riding in order to increase accessibility to these stations. We would also have preferred to see money spent on facilitating voter registration and correcting errors in the register of electors. The real problem is the drop in turnout.

Adding two advance voting days may help some people who could not do so before to get out and vote, but I do not think that it will have much effect. We should give much more thought to particular clienteles such as young people and native people, who have very low turnout, and what we could do to increase their turnout. A much broader discussion is required.

The bill before us is not negative—the parliamentary secretary said as much—but I think that much deeper thought and other ways of doing things are required. Money needs to be invested. The costs incurred by the addition of these two voting days will not increase the number of advance polling stations in a rural riding like mine, Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup. This is a riding with lots of municipalities in it. Offering people more places to vote in advance would have an effect on turnout. When people have to travel many kilometres to get to an advance polling station, they may decide not to go and not be available the actual day of the vote. Then we do not get the desired results.

Statements by Members

I would like to know whether the people who work on elections were consulted, in either a partisan or non-partisan way. For example in my riding my riding president, Daniel Blanchet, is very familiar with election organization. In this regard, we could go much further in the present circumstances. Does the parliamentary secretary think, as I do, that a much broader offensive should be launched so as to increase the choice?

During the last election in France, voter turnout reached 85%. There is no reason why here, with the issues we know about, we should not reach that level, except that with the Canadian federal system it is not easy to make the connection between the federal or provincial elected representative and the voter's choice. Perhaps in this regard the Canadian federal system has a democratic deficit, which will be hard to fix as things stand.

● (1355)

[English]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I agree with much of what my hon. colleague said.

As I mentioned during my address, the bill is not intended to be the panacea for all the ills in the electoral system or democratic system. What it is trying to do, in some small way perhaps, is increase ever so incrementally the level of voter turnout.

Are there more things that could be done? Absolutely, I am sure there could be.

My hon. colleague asked what we could do to increase the level of turnout for voters within aboriginal and first nations communities. I mentioned the fact that the demographic of the 18 to 25-year-olds is at about 25% level when it comes to voter turnout.

Are there things we can do more? Absolutely, whether it be through education or perhaps other procedural items, but those things will have to be done in time. All I am suggesting is that this is a good first step.

Empirical evidence has suggested that the more opportunities and the more advance polls that are presented will in fact increase the voter level turnout, and that is all this bill does. Let us start getting it up there and if there are more things we can do, either at committee or legislatively, let us do that.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to the speech by the member for Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre. I do not agree with him that the government is doing everything it can to increase voter turnout in Canada. The photo ID bill that was passed earlier this year will hinder voter turnout. For the sake of a few fraud cases that we have had in the last four elections, we are making a tremendous restriction on people's ability to go into the voting booth and cast their vote on election day.

The second thing I point out to the member is this. We do not have to be naive enough to think that if we have an eight hour voting period on the day before voting day, this will not turn into a two day voting exercise. When we do that, we will have a situation where we are able to advertise and promote candidates on the day when a large number of people cast their ballots. Therefore, we will have interference in the democratic system if we do not change the

regulations surrounding the ability to advertise on that Sunday prior to the vote.

That is one of the problems. The other problem is we are extending this voting period over two days, we are extending it into a day of rest, we are extending it to a point where difficulties will occur with people in terms of their ability to respond.

The bill has many flaws in it which need to be approached very carefully. Many people have experience in election campaigns. We understand the nature of the election day machine. When we extend it over two days, how will that impact on parties and resources—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sorry but I need to proceed to another item at this point.

ROYAL ASSENT

[English]

The Deputy Speaker: I have the honour to inform the House that a communication has been received as follows:

Rideau Hall
Ottawa

May 31, 2007

Mr. Speaker:

I have the honour to inform you that the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, Governor General of Canada, signified royal assent by written declaration to the bills listed in the Schedule to this letter on the 31st day of May, 2007, at 9:05 a.m.

Sheila-Marie Cook

The Secretary to the Governor General and Herald Chancellor

The schedule indicates the bills assented to were Bill C-9, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (conditional sentence of imprisonment)—Chapter 12, Bill C-48, An Act to amend the Criminal Code in order to implement the United Nations Convention against Corruption—Chapter 13 and Bill C-252, An Act to amend the Divorce Act (access for spouse who is terminally ill or in critical condition)—Chapter 14.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

● (1400)

[English]

GREENBELT AWARD

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on May 22, the Hon. William Grenville Davis, Premier of Ontario from 1971 to 1985, received the Greenbelt Award, in recognition of his environmental vision in protecting the Niagara Escarpment.

The Niagara Escarpment is a unique 725 kilometre land form stretching from Niagara Falls to the Bruce Peninsula. Its wilderness and agricultural areas host a myriad of species, some endangered or rare. In recognition of its ecological significance, it was named a World Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations in 1990.

Statements by Members

In 1973 Premier Davis and his Conservative government took the remarkable step of protecting the Niagara Escarpment from urban sprawl and from development. It was Canada's first environmental land use document designed to protect natural heritage features and prime agricultural land.

Urban sprawl is a serious environmental challenge and it was Premier Davis's first bold move to protect the escarpment that allowed the Oak Ridges Moraine to be designated in 1996 and the Greenbelt to be created in 2005. This truly is a legacy for future generations.

* * *

ALS AWARENESS MONTH

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to acknowledge June as ALS Awareness Month in Canada.

The ALS Society of Canada, founded in 1977, is the only national voluntary health organization dedicated solely to the fight against ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The ALS Society is a leading not for profit health organization working nationwide to fund ALS research.

I would like to recognize a constituent of mine, Benjamin Lindberg, who passed away on April 29 of this year. He was diagnosed with ALS in 1991, and courageously battled the disease for more than 15 years. Our hearts go out to his family and friends. Imagine not being able to walk, write, smile, talk and sometimes breathe on one's own, yet the mind usually remains intact and senses are unaffected. This is what it is like for the 3,000 Canadians who have ALS.

According to the World Health Organization, neurodegenerative diseases are predicted to surpass cancer as the second leading cause of death in Canada by 2040. I hope a cure will become a reality soon.

* * *

[Translation]

QUEBEC COLLECTIVE KITCHENS ASSOCIATION

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Quebec Collective Kitchens Association is celebrating the 25th anniversary of its foundation. These kitchens pool together time, money and skills to prepare healthy, inexpensive and appetizing meals that are served to school age children among others.

Since 1995, the number of collective kitchen groups has gone from 500 to over 1,400, a 280% increase. Last year, these groups fed approximately 37,000 people. In Quebec, close to 7,000 participants get together to cook healthy meals. This means that, every month, thousands of people eat some 850,000 healthy, balanced and inexpensive meals.

The Bloc Québécois and myself congratulate the Quebec Collective Kitchens Association, and we urge it to continue its work in the community.

[English]

MACKENZIE VALLEY GAS PROJECT

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday Rex Tillerson, Exxon's chief executive officer, said in Dallas that unless there were significant royalty and tax breaks, they were going to shelve the Mackenzie Valley gas project.

Instead of handing out corporate welfare to a company that just posted its largest profit ever this year, I have a suggestion for the minister. Government should become a partner in the project as it is a partner in the Norman Wells oil field. Every year the Norman Wells oil field has returned very significant revenues to Canadians. This is the type of government involvement we need in the oil industry. We do not need more giveaways.

With the federal government as a partner, average Canadians can actually see a return on their investment rather than the loss they would see by handing over more tax and royalty breaks to an industry that already gets over a billion dollars in concessions.

Properly developed, the Mackenzie project could be in the national interest, but Canada cannot allow itself to be bullied into giving more corporate handouts. Rather, if Exxon wants taxpayer money, we should see a return on the investment.

* * *

● (1405)

ARTS AND CULTURE

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this past Monday I had the privilege of representing the Minister of Canadian Heritage at the opening night of the Stratford Festival.

On this season's playbill, plays like *King Lear*, *Oklahoma* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* will not disappoint.

Our thanks go out to Richard Monette who will retire this year after 14 successful seasons as artistic director.

Theatre audiences will also love the Drayton Festival Theatre which offers a playbill including *Cash on Delivery*, *Funny Money* and *The Buddy Holly Story*.

The Drayton Festival, under the artistic direction of Alex Mustakas, has theatres across southwestern Ontario, in Drayton, St. Jacobs, Grand Bend and Penetanguishene.

I encourage all members to visit my riding of Perth—Wellington this summer or any other theatre across our great country for culture that is second to none.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I add my voice to the chorus of people demanding justice for Munir Said Thalib.

Statements by Members

Munir was Indonesia's most prominent human rights defender and an especially vocal critic of the human rights abuses committed by that country's military. In 2004, on a flight from Jakarta to Amsterdam, Munir was poisoned. The president of Indonesia commissioned a fact finding report, but refused to release the results of that investigation.

I had the honour of speaking with Munir's widow, who with dignity and courage described her quest to hear the truth about her husband's murder. I stand with her and groups like Rights and Democracy, Amnesty International, KAIROS and Human Rights Watch, among others, in calling for the government of Indonesia to put justice and human rights above politics and to release the report. I also call on the Government of Canada to pressure the government of Indonesia to do the right thing.

* * *

ORGAN DONATION

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I recently learned of a young girl in my riding named Mackenzie Walchuck, who was diagnosed with a life-threatening liver disease at the age of three. Mackenzie is now 11 and the disease has progressed to the point that her liver can no longer function.

She is the youngest person in Canada in need of a liver and she needs it now, but Canada has one of the lowest organ donation rates among industrialized countries. This is something we need to change.

On behalf of Mackenzie and the thousands of other Canadians waiting for new organs, I have a simple request. I ask people to sign their organ donor cards and consider becoming a living donor. Certain types of organs, including kidneys and liver, like Mackenzie needs, can be given safely by living donors. At the cost of a minor inconvenience, we could all save a life.

Health Canada and provincial ministries of health can provide more information for people who want to help. All we need to do is act.

* * *

[*Translation*]

SHAWN MCCAUGHEY

Mr. Marcel Lussier (Brossard—La Prairie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to pay tribute to Captain Shawn McCaughey, a 31-year-old resident of Candiac in Montérégie, who lost his life when his plane crashed while the Snowbirds were training for a show in Montana.

Captain McCaughey learned to fly when he was studying physical geography at Concordia University in Montreal, and his dream was to one day fly a CF-18 fighter.

I have expressed my sincere sympathies and the condolences of the Bloc Québécois to his parents, Mr. McCaughey and Ms. Veilleux, who live in my riding, Brossard—La Prairie, and to his fiancée, Claudia Gaudreault, of Chicoutimi.

[*English*]

SEVEC

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to talk about SEVEC, the Society for Educational Visits and Exchanges in Canada, an organization that has been bringing together young Canadians from different parts of the country for over 70 years.

SEVEC's youth exchanges provide practical experience for students between the ages of 12 to 17 to learn about their second language, experience a different culture and volunteer in two communities in Canada.

I am very proud that one of the largest SEVEC exchange groups is from my riding. As I speak, Hillcrest public school students in Owen Sound are hosting an exchange group from Quebec. Also, it was my pleasure today to meet SEVEC participants from across the country who are on the Hill to talk to MPs about their experiences.

Many students from my riding and certainly from across the country have benefited from this great program. They are the future leaders of this country. I am very proud that this government strongly supports a great program.

* * *

ELECTION IN PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to outline breaches of protocol by the federal Conservative government in its attempt to influence the P.E.I. election. Canadians know how the Conservative government tried to influence the Quebec election through the budget, but the Prime Minister took a different tack to influence voters in P.E.I.

Jason Lee, the Prime Minister's senior appointee for P.E.I., who operates the ACOA minister's regional office, ran as a Conservative candidate, stating on his website, "Lee currently works as a senior aide" to the minister. There are questions about if or when he took a leave of absence without pay.

Further, the Conservative premier's campaign director was appointed to the ACOA advisory board and continued to actively campaign in violation of public service guidelines. Worse, ACOA's computers were used to bolster the Binns blog campaign.

It is time the Prime Minister stopped using federal resources for partisan purposes.

Statements by Members

• (1410)

[Translation]

CRIMINAL CODE

Mr. Daniel Petit (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy about the passage at third reading of Bill C-10, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (minimum penalties for offences involving firearms) and to make a consequential amendment to another Act, which provides for tougher mandatory sentences for persons convicted of serious offences involving firearms.

But the Liberals should be ashamed. They state publicly that they want to fight crime, yet they consistently refused to vote for Bill C-10. Why do the Liberals not want to protect victims of crime?

As for the Bloc, they voted against Bill C-10. The Bloc claims to be defending the interests of Quebec, but it is neglecting to protect the rights of victims of crime in Quebec. Whose interests is the Bloc really protecting? Clearly, the Bloc and the Liberal Party prefer to protect the criminals rather than the victims.

We are taking real steps to make our streets and communities safer.

* * *

[English]

SENIORS

Ms. Penny Priddy (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I often share stories in this House about people who live in my riding. Today I would like to recognize the 17,000 seniors who call Surrey North home.

I was pleased to meet many of my neighbours at a public forum I sponsored last week to help seniors protect themselves from fraud. Not surprisingly, our discussion turned to other issues facing seniors today, such as how there are many elderly people who cannot afford the rising costs of prescription drugs, how it is getting harder to find quality home support in Surrey, and how the responsibility of looking after spouses is difficult without help.

Seniors in Surrey tell me that they are behind the NDP's plan to ensure dignity and security for Canadians as we grow older. They support the seniors charter our party has passed in the House of Commons. They are grateful that we are trying to guarantee retirement security and protect pensions, the only party to do so.

They want the government to act on the NDP's call for free drug and dental coverage for seniors. It is the least we can do for the people who helped build our country.

* * *

SENIORS

Hon. Raymond Chan (Richmond, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, by 2021 senior citizens will constitute 18% of Canada's population. The Conservative government has failed them.

Seniors in my community say that the Conservatives have failed to deliver on their promise to guarantee shorter medical wait times and have failed to deliver the needed resources to deal with our health care problems.

Seniors in my community say that the Conservatives have failed to address the need for affordable housing. We must work with the provinces to provide funding for affordable housing.

Seniors in my community say that the Conservatives have failed them by breaking the income trust promise, costing them their savings and costing Canadians over \$25 billion in investments. We must cut the income trust tax from 31.5% to 10% and refund Canadians their money.

When will the Conservative government stop misleading the public and failing our seniors?

* * *

[Translation]

EDUCATION FOR ALL

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Centrale des syndicats du Québec is now holding its general meeting in Gatineau and its president Réjean Parent gave me 425 letters addressed to the Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for the Francophonie and Official Languages asking Canada to continue its efforts to achieve the objectives of the education for all program.

At the UNESCO World Education Forum held in Dakar in 2000, Canada made a commitment to meet basic education needs by 2015. Throughout the world, 781 million adults are illiterate and 80 million children do not attend school. The signatory countries, including Canada, have a lot of work to do to meet their objectives.

The Bloc Québécois and I add our voices to the CSQ to urge the government to allocate 0.7% of gross national income to development aid, as it promised.

* * *

• (1415)

SACHA BOND

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform my colleagues and the Canadian public about the sad situation Sacha Bond, a Canadian citizen, is in.

At 22, he is serving a 20-year sentence in a Florida prison. He is not a hardened criminal. At the time his crime was committed, he was 20 and visiting Florida. Sacha Bond was ill at the time: he has bipolar disorder, a serious mental illness.

Sacha Bond requires special medical care, and I do not believe he is receiving it in the Florida prison. This care is available in the Canadian prison system, in particular at the Archambault Institution.

I have appealed to the compassion and understanding of the Minister of Public Safety to allow Sacha Bond to serve his sentence in Canada, but to no avail. Sacha bond requires special care to be able to continue to live a healthy life and to eventually reintegrate into society, without posing a threat.

Let us support the transfer request of young Canadian Sacha Bond.

*Oral Questions**[English]***AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD**

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's Conservative government is getting the job done for our farmers.

The first piece of legislation we passed into law in 2006 was about improvements to cash advance payments now available to producers. These changes allowed the spring credit advance and the fall advance payments to be merged into a single program.

Our government's improvements include: increasing the limit on cash advances from \$250,000 to \$400,000; doubling the interest-free amount from \$50,000 to \$100,000; expanding the coverage to include livestock and an additional variety of crops; and extending from 12 to 18 months the time producers have to repay their cash advance, that is, from April to September of the following year.

Farmers apply for a cash advance through producer organizations. Repayments of cash advances are guaranteed. Where I come from, it really helps farmers when money can be borrowed at lower interest rates and cash can be advanced on the anticipated value of farm production. This is another positive step for agriculture.

ORAL QUESTIONS*[English]***MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENCE**

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the defence minister—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. I am sure the Leader of the Opposition appreciates the enthusiastic reception, but it is question period. We have to get moving. The hon. Leader of the Opposition has the floor.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Mr. Speaker, the defence minister misled the House about the Red Cross, detainees, the transfer agreement to the Afghan government, the cost of tanks and, worst of all, the funeral costs for our fallen soldiers.

Each time, he reminds Canadians that he is unfit for the job. His incompetence cannot be allowed to go unchecked any further. Will the Prime Minister demand his defence minister's immediate resignation?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what the Leader of the Opposition says is completely untrue. In the case that he refers to, the Minister of National Defence has indeed and did indeed at the beginning instruct the Department of National Defence to pay all normal funeral costs, even if those exceed the guidelines put in place by the last government. To the extent that we have been able to find out, that has in fact been the case and that has been followed.

In the case raised yesterday, it is the case that some time ago expenses were paid above the limit. There are further expense claims and those are being looked into.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in their touching and brave press conference, Mr. Dinning said:

It is about the principle of the thing. It should be a no-brainer: Your sons or daughters give their lives for Canada and we shouldn't be penny-pinching over whether we're going to pay for funeral expenses.

That is indisputable.

Since the Prime Minister does not have the courage to ask him to do the right thing, will the defence minister do it on his own and step aside?

● (1420)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Once again, Mr. Speaker, in the case raised and in all cases the deaths of Canadian Forces members are terribly tragic events for this country and obviously we feel for their families. The fact of the matter, as I said, is that already some time ago expenses exceeding the limit had been approved. There are further expense requests and those will be dealt with expeditiously.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have had enough. This has gone on long enough. The Minister of National Defence has misled this House too many times. He has shown how incompetent he is too many times.

Since the Prime Minister does not have the courage to ask him to do the honourable thing, will the Minister of National Defence do the honourable thing himself and resign?

[English]

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the Minister of National Defence is a veteran of the Canadian Forces. He has served this country courageously in uniform for 32 years. When the Leader of the Opposition is able to stand in uniform and serve his country, then I will care about his opinion of the performance of the Minister of National Defence.

* * *

GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I cannot remember the Prime Minister's service record.

On Sunday, the Minister of Foreign Affairs foolishly called for the Russians to return to Afghanistan. He is the one responsible for our diplomacy.

On Tuesday, the Minister of International Cooperation declared that the Afghan people do not eat flour. She is the woman responsible for development.

This week, the Minister of National Defence has stumbled from one mistake to the other. He is the man responsible for defence.

Is it not time that the Prime Minister brought this triple crown of incompetence to an end?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will just say that it is true I have never served in the armed forces. I consider that an experience that I have missed in my life, but I can say that I have always lived and worked and paid my taxes in this country.

Oral Questions

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. We seem to be having a lot of noise today. I would urge hon. members to restrain themselves. The hon. member for Etobicoke—Lakeshore has the floor.

Mr. Michael Ignatieff: Mr. Speaker, we can all play these silly games about who is the better Canadian. If they seriously believe that someone who has contributed to this country outside and come back to Canada is less of a Canadian, they should get up and say that to two million Canadians who live and work overseas.

The Speaker: The hon. member's time has expired. The hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie.

* * *

[Translation]

OPTION CANADA

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Prime Minister stated the following in the House in connection with Option Canada: “the reality is that everything has been investigated”. Yet Justice Grenier has, in fact, said that he did not have jurisdiction to examine federal expenses, such as the love-in, within his mandate to investigate Option Canada.

If everything has been investigated, can the Prime Minister tell us who financed the love-in and how much it cost? Justice Grenier and his team of forensic accountants do not even know this themselves. But the Prime Minister has investigated and he knows. Could he tell us?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General is responsible for examining federal expenses. To date, the Government of Canada has followed through on all of the Auditor General's findings and those of the Gomery commission and the inquiry by Mr. Paillé. Once again, everything has been investigated or is currently being investigated.

• (1425)

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, everything, that is, except the Montreal love-in, except the \$20 million in 1995 for the Canadian unity fund, a fund we were told did not exist and had been done away with. Something that did not exist had been done away with. Now we've seen everything.

So \$20 million was used during the referendum period, either prior to it or during it, but the Prime Minister says it has been looked into. He should know. If he has all the information, then let him give it to us, in total transparency. We want to know. The Prime Minister knows, so let him tell us.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Justice Grenier investigated this matter of expenses during the referendum, with the full cooperation of the federal government. The leader of the Bloc is referring to the 1995 rally in Montreal. It was attended by Conservatives, Liberals, New Democrats, Canadians who believe in their country and have the right to believe in their country, despite what the Bloc Québécois thinks.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, what the Prime Minister has just said

is that they have the right to break the law in the name of Canadian unity. Is that it?

We know that the federal government spent \$31 million during the year of the referendum for projects related to Canadian unity. In his inquiry into Option Canada, Justice Grenier found explanations for \$11 million, so there is still \$20 million as yet without explanation.

While we know that federal funds were used to violate Quebec legislation, no one in this government is capable of telling us what those millions of dollars were used for. Let them tell us, then—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, we can see that the Bloc Québécois is desperately trying to hang on to some minor issues. The fact is that the Auditor General of Canada investigated the matter. Justice Grenier had the opportunity to call everyone involved. He did so and he concluded that he could not go any further. Everything has been said about this issue. We on this side are being insulted because we defend our country, but we are proud to defend Canada.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is unbelievable that a former Quebec MNA, who is now in the service of Canada, would accept the fact that Quebec law was violated.

Contrary to what the minister said, this is not a minor issue but, rather, a very serious matter.

Does the Prime Minister agree that basic decency calls for a public inquiry? If, as he claims, everything was investigated, then let him tell us what that money was used for.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to have been a member of the Quebec National Assembly and to have acted as its deputy speaker. I am very proud to have been a member of the government of Robert Bourassa, as was also one of my female colleagues here.

I am not going to take any lectures from Bloc Québécois members, and particularly from the member who just put the question and who never sat in the National Assembly.

* * *

[English]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the disgraceful outbursts that we have just witnessed in this House serve neither soldier nor citizen.

[Translation]

Two days ago, a majority of members voted in this House to get things going, to purify the air, to fight climate change, to clean the air and to improve the health of our citizens, and to reintroduce the clean air and climate change bill in this House for debate and for a vote.

When will the Prime Minister do it?

Oral Questions

•(1430)

Hon. John Baird (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have worked very hard this past year to resolve the problem of climate change here in Canada with good initiatives such as industry regulation.

For the first time in the history of Canada, we are taking action, something that never happened in the last 13 long years.

[*English*]

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government is showing contempt for this Parliament and, worse, the Prime Minister, by his lack of action, pursuant to the direction of this House, is showing total disrespect for the very principles for which he claimed to stand not too long ago.

On April 13, 2005, after a motion had been adopted in this House, the current Prime Minister said at the time that “the Prime Minister has the moral responsibility to respect the will of the House”.

Will the Prime Minister now accept his moral responsibility and bring forward the legislation this—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of the Environment.

Hon. John Baird (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, harmful greenhouse gas emissions have continued to rise year after year in this country. Climate change is having a huge effect on this country.

I believe this government has a moral responsibility to act and we are acting. We are acting in a major way. For the first time in this country we will see an absolute 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, something that we never saw in the last 13 years.

* * *

CANADIAN FORCES

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the incompetence of the Minister of National Defence is no longer in question. It is a proven fact.

How the Conservative government can stand behind the minister while he hides facts, misleads Parliament and spends most of his day doing damage control is beyond any reasonable Canadian.

He says that he issued a directive on the funeral costs of fallen soldiers in February, or last year, or maybe it was last December.

Will the minister table the proof that he ordered his department to cover the full cost of military funerals or will he admit that he cannot table something that does not actually exist?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said in the House a number of times, I directed last year that full funeral costs be given to families according to the normal funeral requirements and that if these amounts exceeded the current guidelines that they were to receive compensation, and that is our policy.

* * *

AFGHANISTAN

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, he does not want to table it.

[*Translation*]

General Raymond Henault, the first Canadian in 30 years to chair the NATO Military Committee, appeared before our committee this morning.

Interestingly enough, he stated that Canada's image would not be tarnished if it were to go ahead with a rotation of our troops in Afghanistan in February 2009, that it is not unusual and that NATO understands when countries make this decision. Rotation is in order.

Now that his claims have been debunked, why is the Prime Minister not respecting his own deadline of February 2009? Why not consider the rotation of our troops, which is considered normal by NATO and not as abandonment, as his propaganda implies?

[*English*]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said a number of times here, our military commitment is to the end of February 2009. The government has not considered any change. If and when it does consider change, any change will be brought before Parliament for discussion and a vote.

* * *

CANADIAN FORCES

Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government has a track record of short-changing our soldiers. We see it with the death benefits for soldiers killed in the line of duty in Afghanistan. We saw it with the benefits for injured soldiers, the lost tax benefits and the danger pay fiasco.

The government promised to immediately extend veterans independence program services to the widows of all, and I repeat all, second world war and Korean war veterans, but there has been nothing so far.

When will the government treat the men and women of the Canadian Forces and their families with the respect they deserve?

Hon. Greg Thompson (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member knows full well that one of the first things I did as Minister of Veterans Affairs was to call for a health care review so we could understand exactly how we could extend those benefits, the VIP precisely. The member knows that and members of the committee know that. We will act on it but not before that full report is in.

Mr. Paul Zed (Saint John, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Mrs. June Dobson of Saint John, like so many other Canadian families, supports our troops by writing to her nephew, Master Corporal Steven Maher, in Afghanistan three times a week, greatly boosting morale.

Bill C-440 would make it free for Canadians to send and receive mail from our troops. All other parties have agreed to fast-track this important bill, except the Conservative Party.

Oral Questions

Will the Prime Minister today support the bill, support our troops and their families and tell Mrs. Dobson that she can send her mail to her nephew for free?

•(1435)

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have had an opportunity to discuss this issue with my colleague. I have told him that we are open-minded on this question and that we will be looking at it. We are following the Standing Orders of this House.

It is unfortunate that those members do not put the same zeal and drive into supporting our troops as we do when we go out and buy equipment to help our troops. Our Prime Minister goes over and supports our troops. He is there when needed. Unfortunately, those members are not there. Those members are all talk and no action.

* * *

[Translation]

FESTIVALS AND SPECIAL EVENTS

Mr. Maka Kotto (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, Quebec's Minister of Tourism, Raymond Bachand, urged Conservative members from Quebec to "rise up and get the emergency funding that Quebec's festivals need". The response from the Minister of the Economic Development Agency was nonsense. This is about the budget of the Minister of Canadian Heritage.

So which Conservative member or minister from Quebec is going to rise and demand that the minister accept her responsibility and hand out the \$30 million that festivals are waiting for as soon as possible?

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I said, this government has a program and the festivals in Quebec are being funded, festivals like the Festival international de la littérature and the Festival du Jamais Lu. In fact, those festivals are in the riding of the leader of the Bloc.

Is the very party that is asking about the use of tax dollars 12 years ago suggesting that we go ahead and fund without a program framework and without clear criteria and guidelines?

[Translation]

Mr. Maka Kotto (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, instead of threatening Mr. Bachand as some Conservative members have done, which of them will dare to put pressure on the minister to transfer the money? Who will dare? If no one will stand up, they had better sink into their natural torpor and inertia and follow Mr. Bachand's advice to stay home and avoid all festivals in Quebec this summer.

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government and this party do not succumb to pressure. What we do is govern in the best interests of Canadians. We have full responsibility to ensure that we support festivals, we support communities, but we use the support and the taxpayers' dollars so that the moneys go where they are intended to go, not to party coffers but to really serve communities. We do it accountably and we do it with transparency.

[Translation]

WAGE EARNER PROTECTION PROGRAM ACT

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the Minister of Labour accused the Bloc Québécois of being responsible for the delay in implementing the amendments to the Bankruptcy Act. This is totally false. The Bloc Québécois would like the wage earner protection program to be implemented quickly, but it also wants Quebec legislation to be complied with, something that does not seem to be a priority for this government and something the bill introduced by the Minister of Labour does not do.

What is the minister waiting for to introduce his bill and accept our one amendment designed simply to comply with legislation in effect in Quebec?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before Christmas, we gave a notice of motion to introduce this bill and fast-track it to the Senate by adopting it at first, second and third reading, because it proposes technical changes to the legislation.

Unfortunately, even though the Bloc Québécois initially told us that it was prepared to cooperate, it changed its tune.

You did not ask for one amendment, but two amendments. These amendments do not reflect the will of all parliamentarians. You must therefore suffer the consequences. You do not want the legislation, so too bad for you.

The Speaker: The Minister of Labour knows that he must address the Speaker, not the other members.

The hon. member for Joliette has the floor.

•(1440)

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, they are not two amendments, but two versions of the same amendment that the Government of Quebec suggested to us. In September 2006, the Government of Quebec informed this government that the bill sponsored by the Minister of Labour violated Quebec legislation.

What is the minister waiting for to consider the amendment suggested by the Government of Quebec and proposed by the Bloc Québécois, so that the wage earner protection program can be implemented?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, even the unions want this legislation to go forward and are pressuring the Bloc Québécois to stop.

Do you know what the Bloc Québécois wants? It wants someone who goes bankrupt to have the right to put money in his RRSP a week before the bankruptcy and for this to be considered normal, even though this money does not belong to him.

We are staying the course. If the Bloc Québécois wants this legislation and if it really wants to protect and get behind workers, it needs to support us so that we can send the bill to the Senate.

Oral Questions

[English]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, not a single environmentalist in this country supports the government's climate change plan. No independent third party will verify the minister's claims because they are simply beyond belief. His own officials tell us their analysis is weak or incomplete and they cannot bear out his numbers. The provinces, all but one, have scolded the Prime Minister for his lack of leadership on absolute greenhouse gas reductions. Even yesterday the "governator" kicked sand in the Prime Minister's face for his failure to act.

As we head into international negotiations next week, what precisely is Canada bringing to the G-8 climate change table?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, not a single former Liberal environment minister agreed that the Liberal Party did anything on the environment. Ask Sheila Copps. She blames the member for Wascana for not supporting Kyoto. Ask Christine Stewart, who blames the leader of the Liberal Party for not doing anything to support Kyoto. Talk to David Anderson who said that the then prime minister did not do anything to support Kyoto.

We are going to the G-8 conference next week with a real plan to see absolute reduction in harmful greenhouse gas emissions, something that will be a first for a Canadian prime minister.

[Translation]

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government can keep saying that it will meet the G-8 targets, but its plan is utterly inconsistent with international consensus.

Its so-called bridge does not have a solid foundation. Canadian experts from all fields continue to find cracks in the minister's plan. Even Governor Schwarzenegger is not strong enough to twist the Prime Minister's arm.

By Monday will the government finally have something solid, serious and concrete to present at the G-8 meeting, or is it going to embarrass Canada yet again?

[English]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, back in 1997 the Liberal Party began to talk a good game on the issue of climate change. Every single year we have seen the problem get worse in this country. Greenhouse gases and climate change are having a huge effect on Canada. Schools are coming off their foundations in Inuvik because the permafrost is melting. We have seen the devastation caused by the pine beetle.

What this country needs and what this world needs is a plan for absolute reductions, something that this government is the first one to offer.

* * *

[Translation]

AID TO AFRICA

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is time that the government opposite woke up to the dangers concerning the environment. It is a little late but there is still time.

Not only will the government disgrace us during the G-8 summit with its bogus plan to protect the environment, but Canada will also be embarrassed when discussion turns to Africa.

The Liberal government assumed the leadership of a worldwide movement by developing a wide-ranging plan under the New Partnership for Africa's Development. We are still waiting for the Prime Minister to take measures to keep the promises we made to Africa.

Before leaving for the G-8, will the Prime Minister today—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of International Cooperation has the floor.

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member knows very well, in our 2007 budget, international aid was increased by 8%. That 8% will make it possible to double our funding for international assistance by 2010-11 from 2001 levels. The Liberals voted against that measure.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Josée Verner: I must also point out that last year the government made a commitment to invest between \$100 million and \$150 million for educational needs in Africa.

● (1445)

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as usual the minister is evading the issue. I am not talking about international aid. I am talking about Africa. This government's deeds do not match its words. At the G-8, in 2006, the Conservative Prime Minister made a commitment to take concrete action to contribute to achievement of the millennium development goals for Africa. However, not one cent of the money promised to wipe out AIDS and polio is included in the budgetary provisions.

When will the Prime Minister stop talking about Africa and starting doing something, as he promised?

Africa, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, to complete the answer on the subject of our aid to Africa: when he was at the G-8 last year, the Prime Minister made a commitment to invest up to \$450 million to strengthen health systems in Africa. This year, again, we announced an innovative project in cooperation with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation concerning the fight against HIV-AIDS. We announced \$120 million at the beginning of December for some 20 projects, specifically in Africa to combat AIDS. The member should pay attention to the great announcements that we are making.

*Oral Questions**[English]***THE ENVIRONMENT**

Mr. Merv Tweed (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this morning President Bush called for a meeting of major greenhouse gas emitting countries by the end of the year in order to establish global emission targets by the end of 2008.

I understand the Prime Minister will be meeting with G-8 countries next week. Will the Prime Minister tell the House what his approach will be to the suggestion by President Bush?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. I am sure the Prime Minister appreciates all the help with his answer, but I think he is ready to give it on his own and members will want to hear the answer the Prime Minister gives to this question.

The right. hon. Prime Minister has the floor. We will have a little order, please.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper: Mr. Speaker, I have heard about the president's speech, but I have not had an opportunity to discuss it with him.

What I will say is that next week we will have the G-8 meeting. As members know, Canada and several of the European countries favour the targets for the reduction greenhouse gas emissions. I would also note that as part of the G-8 meeting there is the G-8 outreach, the G8+5, where most of the world's major emitters will be around one table. I hope we would have the opportunity to discuss the matter then.

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ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Justice Linden has laid the blame for the tragic and preventable events of Ipperwash at the feet of the federal and provincial governments. He said today that neglect by successive federal governments is at the heart of Ipperwash.

I am certain that the minister wants to tell first nations and Canadians how he is going to ensure Ipperwash will never happen again.

Will the minister act on the recommendations of the commissioner and immediately return the site to Kettle and Stony Point First Nation?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Canadian government I would thank Justice Linden for his fine work. The circumstances of the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation are well known to me.

Justice Linden in his report has pointed out that more than 50 years have passed since the end of the war and since the expected return of this army camp land to this first nation. He has chronicled the long neglect by previous federal governments and I agree with his conclusions.

This land was appropriated in 1942 for military purposes. It has been decades since it should have been returned. I am indeed sorry that previous federal governments have not dealt with this. I intend to—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Nanaimo—Cowichan.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is true that both the Liberals and the Conservatives have failed first nations communities, but that cannot be an excuse for inaction by the government. And it is no excuse for the stunt that the Conservatives tried to pull today with human rights legislation.

The commissioner says that the federal government lacks an effective and fair system for land claims. Today it is the minister's responsibility and Canadians demand an immediate solution.

As the Ipperwash inquiry states, the flashpoints are very likely as intense today as they were at Ipperwash. When can first nations expect respect? When will they get a fair and effective land claims system?

● (1450)

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Mr. Justice Linden today made a number of recommendations. A number of those pertain to provincial aboriginal policy and the absolute necessity of having the provincial government present during land claim negotiations. We await the province's response with respect to those recommendations.

With respect to the recommendations relating to the resolution of claims generally, the report reflects many speeches which I have given personally, many discussions which have taken place in Parliament. I can assure the member that she can expect major land claim reforms soon, very soon.

* * *

*[Translation]***MINISTERIAL EXPENDITURES**

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, over the past several days, whenever we have put questions to the Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec about his expenditures, he has remained rather vague in his replies. It is as though he is hiding something from us. The minister said that the contract had been approved by the department's financial comptroller.

Can the minister confirm that the approval did not come, rather, from his chief of staff? Will the minister assume his responsibilities at last, admit that he did something wrong and pay back to Canadian taxpayers the \$24,804 that he gave to his assistant?

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the minister has advised and I have confirmed in this House as well, all the expenditures were disclosed and were in accordance with the approval of the comptroller of the department.

However, I am glad again to have the chance to discuss expenses, because it is great getting them from the Liberals. Today we are one year plus one day after Bill S-4 went to the Senate, where the Liberals do not like to work on the bill, they like to delay it, and we can figure out why. The leader of the government in the Senate under the Liberals spent 3,711% as much as the leader under the Conservatives in the past year. That is an amazing difference. I guess they like their perks in the Senate and that is where they like to spend their time spending the taxpayers' money.

[Translation]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the fact is that the minister is violating the rules of the Treasury Board and of this House by awarding a contract to someone who is already on his staff. Yet, he stubbornly insists in a totally irrational fashion that he did not do anything wrong, while everyone in this House, except him, knows otherwise.

For transparency and accountability's sake, will the Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec admit that it is his chief of staff who approved the contract and related expenditures? Awarding a contract to his assistant is against the rules. Will he pledge to immediately pay back that money?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, everyone in this House has already heard that all Treasury Board guidelines were followed. The contract was approved by the department's financial comptroller. This contract of less than \$25,000 is reported, as it should be, on the department's website, with the person's name and the relevant details, in compliance with all the transparency and accountability rules. We fully support transparency.

[English]

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism has failed to disclose any travel expenses since he took over the job in January.

On May 16 and again on Tuesday, we asked the minister where his travel expenses were posted. Both times he said he had asked the department officials to post the expenses on the website, despite the fact that officials are required to post them automatically. Surprise, the posting has still not been done.

What is it about proactive disclosure that the minister does not understand?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think we heard clearly from the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism that he has directed that those expenses be disclosed. He is quite prepared to do so. They have all been filed and he has directed that they be disclosed.

But I can tell the House that there is a difference in the lifestyle of Liberals living in government and the lifestyle of Conservatives living in government. We can see that the hospitality expenses of the former minister of heritage on the Liberal side in her last year were 321% higher than those of the Conservative minister in her first year.

● (1455)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what is the hold up and what are the Conservatives hiding? The secretary of state likes to justify laundering his expenses by saying that his friends are taking care of it.

If he has done all the extensive travelling he claims, are we to understand that he owes more than 100 favours to his friends?

Whether it was a charge to the government or a personal gift to the minister from friends, the minister has a legal obligation to disclose it. Which was it, a gift or a charge, and how much?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have indicated of course, everything is disclosed properly or has been directed to be disclosed.

As I indicated, in that first year, for Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, the total expenses under the Liberals were significantly higher than those under the Conservatives.

The bottom line is that when it comes to minding taxpayers' dollars, Conservatives put taxpayers first. Liberals put their own wining and dining first.

* * *

*[Translation]***WAGE EARNER PROTECTION PROGRAM ACT**

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I wish to return to the Bankruptcy Act. I have discussed this briefly with the Prime Minister. I have discussed it with government ministers. I have discussed it with the labour federations in Quebec. I have discussed it with Quebec minister of intergovernmental affairs Pelletier, and he has proposed an amendment we have passed on to the government. Everyone agrees on acting quickly, while still respecting jurisdictions and the civil code of Quebec.

My question for the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, the Quebec political lieutenant, with whom I have had a constructive discussion, is this: are they prepared to take action that will respect the jurisdictions of Quebec and its Civil Code?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the various labour organizations and the workers have been asking us for this legislation for months and months now. They are asking all parliamentarians to respect the wishes of the previous Parliament. This legislation is ready. We have tabled a notice of motion, but the only problem is that the Bloc Québécois is anti-worker. It is doing everything possible to impede progress.

Oral Questions

If we went to the Senate, there would be nothing to prevent it from proposing amendments. If there were anything in it they felt could be improved, it could be returned to the House. But the Bloc Québécois does not want this legislation. It is anti-worker.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this minister is not only incapable of counting, he is also incapable of thought. He has a serious problem.

I know the workers and the labour federations of Quebec. When this government says that Quebec jurisdictions and the Quebec Civil Code must be respected, I take it seriously. I have had a good discussion with the political lieutenant, whom I am again calling upon here in this House. There is no way that the Civil Code of Quebec will not be respected.

When the minister tells us to send it up to the Senate, where amendments can be made, I would suggest to him that he bring the legislation here to the House, because it is possible that amendments can be made. He is the one who does not want to table it. There is nothing stopping him from tabling it. And the Government of Quebec requires amendments.

Will he get moving on this?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would remind hon. members that the bill, the notice of motion we have tabled, is in keeping with what had been decided by the previous Parliament.

The Bloc Québécois needs to respect the way the Canadian system operates. There are two chambers here. The changes being made to the legislation are technical ones. The Senate is in a position to carry out an in-depth analysis of it in order to save some time, so that workers losing their wages as the result of a bankruptcy can have up to \$3,000 in protection. But the Bloc Québécois is doing everything it can to delay things and to prevent progress from being made in this situation.

* * *

[English]

CANADA SUMMER JOBS

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the summer grants program has been a case study in mismanagement. The new program went off the rails big time, and scrambling, frantic on the fly policy made it worse.

Government members and ministers flew into damage control. The height of incompetence though was the charge by the Minister of Foreign Affairs that bureaucrats were to blame. That is disgraceful and offensive.

As the government spins out of control on this issue, will the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development tell us if he believes that his officials are really to blame for this Conservative fiasco?

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, do you know what is really incompetent? It is when the member stands up and defends an old program that funnelled thousands and thousands of dollars to very

large corporations like Bacardi, Ford and Safeway. We do not want to go back to that.

The new program is about ensuring that students get the best possible work experience. Thousands of students today enjoy summer jobs in their field that will allow them to go on to very successful careers and I think we should all be very supportive of that.

* * *

• (1500)

JUSTICE

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on Tuesday, despite promising that he wanted to get tough on crime, the suspect Liberal leader and most Liberals voted against increasing minimum sentences for gun crime. What a hypocritical flip-flop as the Liberal Party platform stated that the Liberals would double the minimum mandatory sentences for serious gun related crimes. I guess even in opposition they still cannot keep their promises.

My question is for the Minister of Justice. What will happen to this bill now that it is going to languish in the Liberal dominated Senate?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that certainly is a good question, but I want to thank all those members of the House who supported Bill C-10. That is the bill that provides mandatory minimum sentences for people who commit serious gun crimes.

I realize that the members of the Liberal Party are going to have a lot of explaining to do to their constituents this summer. They ran on a promise of getting tough on gun crime and then voted against Bill C-10 when they had the first opportunity.

They should have been listening to the premier of Ontario and the mayor of Toronto who know what most Canadians know, that if members want to do something about gun crime in this country they have to support the agenda of Canada's new government.

* * *

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last year the Minister of National Defence signed a policy to handle detainees taken at sea as part of HMCS *Ottawa's* participation in George Bush's war on terror.

Why did the minister sign a new policy? Has HMCS *Ottawa* taken any detainees in the Indian Ocean or in the Persian Gulf?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a policy was issued because the military needed guidance and the simple answer is no.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I asked the minister's department for transfer documents for all detainees taken during operations at sea and his department told me that it does have transfer documents for detainees, but it will not release them for another 150 days.

Business of the House

I ask the minister again. Did Canada take detainees at sea as part of the war on terror and why does his department need almost half a year before it will disclose those documents?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member changed her question. Her first question related to HMCS *Ottawa*. HMCS *Ottawa* took no detainees.

However, during the Liberal government's time, detainees were transferred.

* * *

[Translation]

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I believe I will find unanimous consent of this House to call on the Minister of Labour to immediately table his bill to amend the Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act, provided such a bill indeed exists.

Let him table it. We are waiting to amend it.

Do I have the unanimous support of this House?

Some hon. members: Yes.

[English]

The Speaker: The hon. government House leader? No.

[Translation]

I also have a request for the hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie. I believe he used an unparliamentary word during the response of the Minister of Labour during today's question period.

I hope he can withdraw that word now, please.

An hon. member: What was the word?

Mr. Gilles Duceppe: Mr. Speaker, I withdraw it. I know I cannot say that here; outside, yes, but not here. I withdraw it.

That said, I believe I have the support of the Liberals and the NDP for this bill to be tabled immediately.

Is the government ready to table it?

[English]

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is a bill on the order paper. It has not yet been introduced in the House. However, if we were to have agreement from all the parties to have it approved at all three stages as we had sought in the past, we would be happy to move it.

The Speaker: Might I suggest that negotiations go on elsewhere since the bill, according to the House leader, has not yet been introduced. When it is, perhaps then it can be dealt with.

• (1505)

[Translation]

This is a matter for the House leaders and it is not a matter for discussion right now in the House.

The hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe: Mr. Speaker, if I understand correctly, he is refusing to table it for amendment, preferring to leave it to the Senate, and yet he is blaming the Senate for the delay.

I invite them to table it here so that we can take action. By refusing to take action, he will prove they have reached the heights of hypocrisy.

[English]

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, again, it has been available to all parties since last December. We have sought to have unanimous consent. We are happy to do that or any other agreement that all parties can come up with.

* * *

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

The Speaker: It being Thursday, we will now have a question from the hon. member for Wascana.

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am sure the House will be fascinated to learn from the government House leader what his agenda includes for the next 10 days or so, through to the end of next week.

In giving us his answer, I wonder if he could indicate, despite the government's protestations of good intentions, why there continue to be efforts by government members on committees like finance, agriculture and official languages to filibuster and obstruct the work of those committees.

With respect to the legislation that has just been under discussion here, the wage earner protection act, the Minister of Labour effectively admits that there is a problem with this legislation, but he is unwilling to fix it in the House of Commons. He wants to plunk the job of fixing it into the Senate, the very Senate which the Conservatives daily condemn.

To expedite the bill the Liberal official opposition is prepared to allow the Senate to do the remedial work that the government should do. If it is more expeditiously done in the Senate, we are prepared to accept that, but why will the minister not just assume his responsibility and do his own job?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with regard to the last point, we have already addressed that.

However, with regard to the balance of Thursday's statement, I am pleased to respond that today and tomorrow we will continue with Bill C-55, the expanded voting opportunities bill; Bill C-14, the adoption bill; Bill C-57, An Act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act; and Bill C-45, the fisheries act.

Government Orders

In the last Thursday statement, we indicated that we were hoping to have this week as “enhancing the quality of the life of first nations people week” but this was cancelled by the opposition parties when they did not release Bill C-44 from committee, the bill that would give the first nations protection under the Canadian Human Rights Act. Not only is it being held up now but, as early as this morning in this House, the opposition obstructed our efforts to get the bill dealt with forthwith so that first nations people could have the human rights that every other Canadian enjoys. We know that if all parties would agree to proceed with that, as we saw when we sought unanimous consent, it could proceed, but some would prefer to obstruct it.

Next week will be welcome back from committee week, when we welcome business that has been at committee, including some that has been stalled there for some time. We will deal with Bill C-52, the budget implementation bill, which will begin report stage on Monday and, hopefully, we can get third reading wrapped up by Tuesday.

Following the budget bill, we will call for report stage and third reading of Bill C-35, bail reform. After that, we will call Bill C-23, the Criminal Code amendments. I hardly remember when Bill C-23 was sent to the committee by this House. That took place long before I was even House leader 228 days ago.

Thursday, June 7, shall be the last allotted day. There are a number of other bills that we would like to include in our welcome back from committee week. I still hope we can see Bill C-44, the amendments to the Canadian Human Rights Act, to which I just referred; Bill C-6, the amendments to the Aeronautics Act; Bill C-27 dealing with dangerous offenders; Bill C-32 dealing with impaired driving; and Bill C-33 dealing with foreign investment, if the opposition parties will release those from committee.

* * *

• (1510)

[*Translation*]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with respect to the continuation of debate on the fourth report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, I think there would be unanimous consent for the following:

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practices of the House, the debate pursuant to Standing Order 66 concerning the Fourth Report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration be deemed to have taken place and all questions necessary to dispose of the motion to concur in the report be deemed put and a recorded division be deemed requested and deferred to Wednesday, June 6, 2007, at the expiry of the time provided for Government Orders.

The Speaker: Does the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons have the unanimous consent of the House to move this motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

(Motion agreed to)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*English*]

CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-55, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (expanded voting opportunities) and to make a consequential amendment to the Referendum Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Speaker: When the bill was before the House for debate, the hon. parliamentary secretary to the government House leader had the floor for questions and comments. I understand a question or comment had been directed his way. It is now the hon. parliamentary secretary's turn to respond to the question or comment delivered before we interrupted for question period.

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 question put by the hon. member for Western Arctic had two points to it but the first had nothing to do with Bill C-55, which is not unusual coming from an NDP member.

However, he did say that he did not believe that our Bill C-31, which deals with voter fraud, would in fact be effective because it would disenfranchise voters. I absolutely reject that premise and I think we will find out, in years to come and elections to come, that this bill will increase the security of voters, ensuring that all voters eligible to vote have an opportunity to do so.

However, he did make one comment about Bill C-55 concerning the advance polling date, the Sunday immediately preceding election day. He said that was tantamount to having a two day election and in fact that would be wrong. For the life of me, I cannot understand why any member of this place would want to see fewer opportunities for voters to exercise their franchise rather than more.

He also pointed out that one of the reasons he felt this would be wrong was that advertising by political parties would continue on the day prior to the election and that this would be something that would unduly influence the voter outcome. I must point out that advertising is already allowed during regular advance polling days, days 10, 9 and 8, prior to an election. In other jurisdictions, including my province of Saskatchewan, political parties can advertise on voting day.

Therefore, the point made by the hon. member for Western Arctic is weak at best.

Bill C-55 is intended to increase the level of voter turnout. If we can do that, in any way, shape or form, no matter how small or how large, it will be a good day and a good bill for democracy.

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Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was interested in the comments by my colleague from Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre. I concur with some of his points and I do see his point.

However, he mentioned the idea of election spending on days other than election day. Maybe he will have a chance to explain to us what his views would be on election spending outside of the writ period generally?

I will sum up my point by saying that we now have a fixed election date in this country. We now know when the next federal election will be, unless the minority government falls and it comes earlier, and there are strict spending limits for the writ period in and around that election, which is not likely to happen but it could happen that the government could fall sooner.

Is it not now time to introduce regulated spending limits for the entire four year period outside of the writ period? If it is unfair for big money to have undue influence during a writ period, which is why we have limits, is it not equally unfair for big money or whoever has the biggest bank account to have undue influence over political discourse for the entire four year period? Would he support spending limits in between elections?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I should also thank the hon. member for all his participation in democratic reform initiatives, including the work that he did on the legislative committee for Bill C-2, the Federal Accountability Act, where he was instrumental in assisting passage of that very bill.

I would point out to the member from Winnipeg that while he referenced the fixed election date, that being the third Monday in October 2009, and he commented that it was unlikely that this minority government would last until then, I can assure him that with the continued support of the NDP we will reach the fixed election date on the third Monday of October 2009.

I am encouraged to hear that the member seems to be willing to support our initiatives for the next two years and that we will in fact see an election fall on the appointed and fixed date.

However, the member's question had to do with whether there should be spending limits between elections and not just in the writ period. I think that is a valid point to make and I think it should be examined. Some of the difficulties, obviously, are what is considered election spending as opposed to government spending? How do we define partisan versus non-partisan?

I think those questions need to be considered. I would have no difficulty whatsoever examining that in committee or elsewhere.

● (1515)

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am privileged to rise today to continue the debate with respect to Bill C-55.

There has been a great deal of extrapolation and overview with respect to the ingredients of the bill. I do not think there is anyone in the House who would take exception to the efforts of the government and the opposition to find ways to broaden the franchise and to encourage people to exercise their democratic right to vote. As has been pointed out, this is one of the most basic freedoms that we

enjoy and we should always be perceptive and reactive to citizens' needs for accessibility in order to exercise that franchise.

This particular bill is systemic in the sense that it deals with the mechanics of the election through the availability of advance polls. The bill is suggesting two additional days, one of which would be exactly the same, and the other being the Sunday prior to the election. Polling subdivisions across the country would be the same as those that would be accessible in the general election. That is self-evident in the sense that it would be more accessible for Canadians across the country to avail themselves of their franchise. Thus, it would be surprising if there were any opposition to that.

One issue has been indirectly raised and I would like to bring it into the discussion. I would suggest that this is more of a discussion with respect to allowing people to exercise their franchise and encouraging them to vote rather than one in terms of the usual cut and thrust of debate where something is put forward and the opposition has to tear it apart and find some way to improve it.

There are many improvements, I suppose, that generally could be made to the manner in which we carry on the electoral process. Fixed dates has been mentioned, and it is generally considered that this would be advantageous and a step in the right direction toward democratic reform.

The advance poll would be on the Sunday prior to the election and would have the same level of accessibility as a regular polling day during an election. This advance poll would be held the day before the election. I do not know whether the government has given enough consideration to the implications this might have if there were an issue of a high level of interest such as we experienced during the same sex debate where amendments had been made and had become law, but there was a continuing discussion of that through the last election period.

The fact that there was an interlude or, what I would characterize it as, a cooling off period between the time the bill became law and the election, very strong positions were taken across the country among various groups, but at the end of the day everyone had the opportunity for discussion, decisions had been made and we were moving ahead.

● (1520)

This just occurred to me. In the heat of debate, where there are issues that touch on the moral and legal lines, is it in the national interest for there to be the heightening of concerns and a re-awakening of issues the day before the vote? The ability to have a cooling off period, a period where people have an opportunity to digest what has been done, reflect on it and then exercise their franchise during the general election is that implicated by the fact that we are now having a poll the very day before an election, a poll that will be accessible in every constituency, every subdivision across the country?

In fact, that might become the source of discussion as a matter of religion. We have always tried to consider religion as absolutely sacrosanct in terms of issues related to what people view as their religious feelings on a matter and balance that against what is a political issue that is being defined by charter issues and so on.

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It is this kind of balance that Canadians have been able to advance civil society through our institutions and conventions. We treat our conventions with respect and tend not to over-moralize. We try to have a balanced perspective with respect to how we would like to entrench the rights of all Canadians in terms of our institutions through our Charter of Rights. This was both the process and substance of what that discussion was all about many months ago, and we advanced past that.

I have a concern, and I am not sure whether it has been reflected on by the government, about should an issue of this nature arise or one related to our history in conscription. This was an extremely divisive issue and we had to come to grips with it. It led to regional differences that in fact threatened to divide the country and it took years for us to move past that issue.

The day before the election is there a possibility that there could be a negative influence in terms of institutions that would now be used, in the name of religion, to mobilize around particular points of view and inordinately affect the outcome with respect to an issue as it relates to a political decision? I only put that out as a concern. It has not been mentioned and it is perhaps something, had there been a broader consultation, that would have been more clearly articulated with respect to the bill before us.

When we look at the statistics, particularly for young people and those who have felt disenfranchised for whatever reason, they indicate that voter involvement has gone down. It was as high as 75%, as I understand it, in the 1970s and 1980s and has gone down to 65% or 60%. We note also that even among seniors, for whatever reason, there seems to be a diminishing of interest with respect to exercising their franchise, which might be a surprise to some people. There are regional patterns with respect to people being less inclined to exercise their franchise.

• (1525)

Although this is an exception, it is worthy of mention. Where we have done studies empirically trying to establish why people get involved in the process of voting and so on, it has been very clear that new Canadians, particularly those who have become citizens in the last decade, are exercising their franchise at a higher level than those who have been here for a long time.

Is it because we take our democratic right to vote for granted? Is it because of the experience new Canadians have, coming from countries where they did not have those privileges? As immigrants always have in the history of our country, they come here to seek a better life, a life where they have more say in their own futures, the futures of their children, the legacy they are creating. It is obvious to me that with those higher voting ratios among new Canadians, there is something for us to learn.

It is why this discussion goes beyond Bill C-55. Bill C-55 provides another opportunity for people to exercise the franchise. For us to really come to grips in real terms with increasing the responsibility and accountability to be part of the electoral process, we have to look beyond Bill C-55.

My colleagues in the New Democratic Party were speaking yesterday about proportional representation. They were alluding to what was happening in the province of Ontario with respect to a

citizens commission, which looked at different approaches to electoral reform. This will find its way through into the next election in which there will be a referendum, just as there was in British Columbia. This is one approach that could be taken with respect to mobilizing public opinion and attempting to focus that on improving our electoral system.

I believe the government has attempted to look at different approaches because two other bills were introduced. Bill C-56 was introduced to change the formula for redistributing seats in the House of Commons. Bill C-54 looked at the restrictions on the use of loans by political entities governed by the Canada Elections Act.

The amendments through those bills were earnest attempts by the government to focus on the whole issue of accountability and relevance, and hopefully a corollary to that, getting people involved in the democratic process and in political organizations and mobilizing them to become more involved in Canadian politics.

As part of the discussion, I will make a few comments without straying from the intent of Bill C-55. I have stated that we all should support Bill C-55 with respect to the amendments it is make to allow for two additional advance polls.

However, if we are to draw people into what we view as political life and the discussion of issues that affect us, we have to look at issues related to accessibility. We have to look at whether we are really debating the real issues that people are not only interested in, but also issues that they see as part of the legacy for them and their children.

• (1530)

We also have to take some reflection on whether we have and are earning the public trust. It is matters of accessibility and that we are dealing with the real issues that concern Canadians. If we are doing those in earnest, they will view that as us exercising what they deem to be the public trust.

I reflect yesterday when we had workers here from all over the country. I know many of us in the House joined with the Canadian Labour Congress. People from coast to coast to coast talked about job loss and about the dramatic and traumatic implications of that. Workers had tears in their eyes. At the gathering in room 200, I and many of my colleagues were moved as we listened to the descriptions of what was happening in small communities across the country, with respect to the loss of jobs.

I mention this because this is not something of a partisan nature. Yes, we can look at governments and say we did better than that. These issues are of a global nature, which reflect on very complex and interconnected issues related to capital and how we are competing with countries in the global economy and what is happening with respect to foreign investment in terms of how we can connect and convince Canadians that we have control over our economic future.

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It is related to issues that people are caught in a sense of helplessness. If they see this House, both in terms of the substance of that issue and the style of addressing it, they will see us grappling with the issues about they are most concerned. In that way we will be earning to some extent their trust. They may think we are making mistakes in their opinion or they may think we are on the right track, and hopefully we are. They may exercise their franchise in different ways, but that is part of believing in this country and believing in our institutions of governance.

I use that as an example because it goes beyond this bill. It goes into the manner in which we have representation and the manner in which we debate and are seen to be debating. It relates to how we contribute to the positive culture of parliamentary democracy in Canada.

I have shared this on occasion with many of our colleagues, that sometimes we are less than up to the challenge in terms of meeting the expectations of Canadians.

I will talk just for a moment to Bill C-56 as it relates to broadening the franchise. As I mentioned, that bill deals with changing the formula to redistribute seats in the House. In terms of whether we are earning the public trust, both the province of Quebec and the province of Ontario have indicated great concerns with respect to what the bill says. The government should be aware that consultation is absolutely fundamental to gaining the public trust and that we are attempting to broaden the opportunities for people to get involved in the process.

The last comment I have is with respect to Bill C-54 on loans. One of our most sacred rights is the right to be a candidate. Under the Canada Elections Act, we have the fundamental processes and protection in place to ensure that loans are dealt with, that candidates cannot go beyond what they spend.

With respect to some of the content of Bill C-54, it becomes apparent that some are less equal than others when it comes to borrowing money. What we have said is we will make everybody borrow from the bank, thus making it impossible to go our friends and have them on record loaning us money and on record having to pay us back.

• (1535)

Everybody now has to go to the bank and I am not sure that it is a democratic principle that everybody has to go to the bank because everybody does not have the equal ability to get the same loan and get the same rate of interest, and so on. Everybody always has to negotiate.

That bill went, to some extent, philosophically in an opposite way. The legislation that the government had brought in previously was designed to deal with that.

I did not mean to stray by mentioning Bill C-56 and Bill C-54, but I did want to elaborate. If we are dealing with electoral reform to broaden the franchise, those are the things we have to increase. We have to increase accountability, we have to increase accessibility, and we have to earn the public trust.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my hon. colleague's discussion of Bill C-55.

We talk about wanting to engage the public and wanting to get people involved in the democratic process. However, I find that there is such a massive disconnect between what happens in this House and what happens out in the real world. For example, I would suggest that civility and accountability in this House would probably go a long way to getting people actually feeling that they should get off their couch and participate in the democratic process.

When we are looking at how we will actually engage people, my question concerns this notion of a so-called advance poll on a Sunday. It is clear. We are not talking about an advance poll. We are talking about the full election machine running on the one day that people have for their families. People will be knocking on their doors, the phones will be ringing from the phone banks, and someone will be saying, "Have you come out to vote?" There is stress on our volunteers.

Whether one is from a church background like myself, and our family has always felt Sunday was our day, or like people I know who do not go to church but feel that Sunday is the one day for them to just be with their families, the sense I am getting from people I have spoken with about this idea is that they will now have government in their face on their one day. Government will be trampling on the time they have and basically throwing it upon them to rise above this resentment and see themselves as citizens in a democratic debate.

My question to the member is this. Should we not be respecting the voters, respecting the one day they have and finding some other legitimate ways to engage them in the democratic process rather than trampling on the one day that we have set aside in the week for the family?

Mr. Alan Tonks: Mr. Speaker, it was part of what I was trying to grapple with when I talked about that cooling off period from the heat of an election to the actual deliberation, when the voters, Canadians across the country, would reflect on the issues. They would have been bombarded with election material and comment through the media and so on.

It is the one element that is an exception to the general rule by which the government is operating. It should, in the name of accessibility, make more time available. We have two extra days. However, it is the day before the election which is of concern from the perspective of both the question and my comments, but it is also the intensity.

It is not just a general advance poll. It is really the mirror of the general election the day before with polls in every constituency subdivision. It really is election day on the day before.

Yes, I do agree that there should be some balance that could have been brought in. Two days, yes, but is it necessary that it has to be on the day before and at the intensity that is being put forward by the government?

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• (1540)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a brief comment and ask a question. It seems that my colleague supports providing two more days of advance polling, as proposed in this bill.

The government says that its goal is to encourage more people to vote, but does my colleague agree that this will not make a big difference? Yes, two more advance polling days will be offered. However, in a riding like mine, Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, which is quite large—for those who are somewhat familiar with Quebec, it is located between Saint-Eustache and Gatineau—people who want to vote sometimes have to travel over 100 km to get to an advance polling station.

This bill contains no provisions to increase the number of advance polling stations. If the government really wants to encourage people to vote, it must ensure that there are advance polling stations as close as possible to where they live. It must increase the number of polling stations significantly. As things stand now, even if two more advance polling days are added, people in my riding will still have to travel over 100 km to get to the advance polling stations.

I do think that we have to support this bill; nevertheless, does my colleague agree that if the government really wanted to encourage people to go out and vote, it should have provided for more advance polling stations in small communities, as close as possible to where people live? That would really help ensure that all citizens have the same opportunity to vote in advance.

[*English*]

Mr. Alan Tonks: Mr. Speaker, this is the flip side. While I appear to have been arguing with respect to the advance poll on the Sunday before the general election, I was arguing that it was an unnecessary intrusion that by its very quantitative exposure would distort the electoral process in somewhat negative terms.

I was arguing that to some extent, more as the devil's advocate I suppose, but now my colleague from the Bloc brings the other side of the question, the flip side. He is indicating that in his constituency, because of distance factors, more polling subdivisions are required and that would be a qualitative extension, and would help people in his community to vote because of the long distances between the communities.

I would like to point out to my colleague from the Bloc that on that side of the coin the government actually has created the polling subdivisions in keeping with those that will be created for the general election. On that advance day prior, the Sunday before the election, his constituents will in fact have access to local polling subdivisions.

That is my understanding of how the bill is being presented. I suggest to my colleague from the Bloc, from his perspective, that this is a progressive step that will make the electoral process more accessible to his constituents.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, we are talking about how to encourage people to participate in voting. Yet, we just had a bill that was brought forward and voted on by the House where we insisted that people now have to have photo identification to vote.

It was a big issue for me in my region because I have many very isolated communities, first nation communities, with no road access and many people with no proper identification who would like to participate and vote. We have extremely low levels of voting there.

I was in Toronto last week and met with senior citizens. They were asking me about whether they were going to be able to vote because they do not have drivers' licences and they have the old fashioned health card. I assured them that they were still going to be able to vote.

We have questions in terms of even the Elections Canada list. We used to go door to door. We used to ensure that all our citizens were accounted for before the vote. That was how we went out and made sure that people voted as opposed to catching them coming out of church on Sundays.

I would like to hear from my hon. colleague on this because he has been in politics longer than I have. Are there perhaps other ways, or have we actually thrown those out along the way, throwing out the baby with the bath water for example, where we have actually made it harder for people to vote?

• (1545)

Mr. Alan Tonks: Mr. Speaker, on the surface it may look like we were showing two different sides to the same coin, one arguing an unnecessary intrusion because of the nature of the electoral process, where we are going to have an advance poll the day before the election, and then the flip side of that from the Bloc's perspective, where having more polling divisions is good.

Now my colleague from the New Democratic Party is saying that in terms of voter registration, his position from a northern perspective is that there would be people in those communities who do not have the necessary voter registration cards or something that identifies them.

However, in urban communities, the issue on the flip side of the same coin is ensuring that there are no irregularities with respect to voter discrepancies. People pick up their cards in apartment buildings and then vote. They do not have to provide, and are not compelled to provide, the appropriate registration card that identifies who they are and so on.

As I understood it, the NDP's position was that it was against the matter of including birth dates as part of the voter registration cards. I feel that is a progressive step to be realistic. The result of our discussion was that everybody should have that card and I think that probably everybody should try to have it in order that those kinds of irregularities do not happen.

Government Orders

[Translation]

Mr. Réal Ménard (Hochelaga, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak to Bill C-55. Before I get to the substance of the bill, I would like to inform the House of the departure of one the Bloc Québécois' colleagues, Catherine Lacroix, whose work is greatly appreciated. I know that all parties have people behind the scenes who help us on a daily basis. Ms. Lacroix, whom I affectionately call Catou, has been with us for many years. She is following her adventurous spirit and plans to travel around Europe. She will leave us at the end of this session. I am not certain if that will be next week or the week after, but I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for her loyal service to the members of the Bloc Québécois, her unfailing good humour and her perennial smile. We know that it is not always easy to work with elected representatives. First of all, by definition, elected representatives tend to be self-confident. While not suggesting that we all have big egos, I think it is fair to say that, in order to make it in politics, one must have self-confidence. I would ask my fellow members in this House to join me in a round of applause for our colleague, Catherine Lacroix, who will be leaving us to take up new challenges. I know there are other people just as dedicated as Ms. Lacroix who work with the Liberals, the NDP and the government.

Democracy is not only a virtue, but a practice that must constantly be questioned. As elected representatives, we have a vested interest in the voting process, particularly whether it should be a proportional system or a uninominal single ballot system, as it is at the federal level and in most provinces. We have a keen interest in electoral motives, polls and, basically, in knowing why people vote the way they do. What makes people vote for one party over another? What makes a certain candidate successful in several election campaigns? What variables contribute to the popularity of candidates?

One might compare urban communities or urban and rural communities, but the most important principle is that of equal opportunity. In a democracy, the primary consideration must not be wealth, gender or age; we must all be equal before the law, whether we have \$100,000 in the bank or are homeless. It is part of being a citizen to select those people who will represent the others, which is the work of parliamentarians.

We are all aware, of course, that voter turnout rates have dropped in recent years. When we were younger—as older members in particular, and there are many, will recall—we were told that voting was a duty, like any other civic duty. There was disgrace and stigma attached to not voting, which was considered as a form of social drop-out behaviour.

Over time, voting came to be viewed as somewhat less important. Let us face it, we have witnessed some social dropping out. Canada is not alone. This is true of several other democracies, such as France, Italy and Germany. I remember the days when Verchères-Les Patriotes was represented in this place by Stéphane Bergeron, our whip. At the time, a debate among our caucus was taken up by other caucuses. Should we not lower the voting age to 16, we asked ourselves? A colleague from the Liberal Party, whose riding I cannot remember but who was the youngest member ever in this House, introduced a bill to allow voting at 16.

● (1550)

It was said to be a way of not only enlarging the electorate, but also of making young people aware of their duties as citizens. I was rather in favour of the bill. I do not know how my colleagues in the House saw it, but we discussed it in caucus and at our general council.

There were two schools of thought. At 16, we can drive a car. As soon as we start working, we can pay income tax. So some said that, if there are a number of things we can do at 16, if we can do such important things involving our personnel commitment, we should be able to avail ourselves of the right to vote.

Others in my party thought differently. They included my former nice parliamentary leader. He is still nice, but he is no longer leader. The word “former” does not apply to nice but to leader. He said that we had to look out at what was involved in terms of responsibility. This was an argument worthy of consideration. Would young people take the time to become informed? There is something solemn underlying the right to vote. Is there not something a bit offhand about wanting to lower the voting age?

So what we have to be concerned about is turnout. Here I will digress. I was rereading the figures in the report by Justice Grenier. In the 1995 referendum, voter turnout was 93%. That is getting close to 100%. And it shows that when the stakes are high, people can be civic-minded and do turn out to vote.

Obviously the referendum is still an important event. To make a long story short, members will recall that there were two firmly established camps. There was the camp for change, with Mr. Parizeau, Mr. Bouchard and the others, who wanted the National Assembly to be able to keep all its taxes in Quebec City, to be able to decide on its own foreign policy and exercise all the prerogatives presently held by the House of Commons. The other camp, led by Daniel Johnson, Liza Frulla and Jean Charest, argued in favour of belonging to Canada, saying that there was an equalization system that benefited Quebec and that it was in Quebec's interest to be part of a great Canadian whole.

When we talk about democracy, we know of course that there have been some major breaches of the Referendum Act. If I may, I am going to say a few words about the Referendum Act. This legislation was proposed by Robert Burns, who was also the member for Hochelaga—Maisonneuve. He had got this mandate from René Lévesque.

One of the first things that the Parti Québécois did when it came to power in 1976 was to clean up election financing. It put an end to slush funds. Furthermore, Mr. Lévesque asked Robert Burns, an Irishman, to draft a green paper on referendums. This resulted in a certain number of rules. For example, during a referendum, to respect the principle of equality of opportunity, all members of the National Assembly must register either with the yes or the no camp. This results in the establishment of a provisional committee that later becomes a permanent one with equitable public funding. It is interesting to note that equality of opportunity is so important that a government does not have the right to spend more just because it calls a referendum.

Government Orders

Another rule from Robert Burns' Referendum Act is the idea that there must be a democratic debate of 35 hours.

An hon. member: Oh, oh!

Mr. Réal Ménard: Mr. Speaker, I believe that our NDP colleague would like to tell us about the very fine campaign conducted by the yes camp and how it won. We tell ourselves that there will be another time.

• (1555)

Having said that, the Referendum Act also contains the idea of a question initiated by the government in power.

I am presently writing a book. I hope that there will be some individuals, some generous souls, who will read it over a scotch one stormy night. It might be an interesting read. Looking back at the 1980 and 1995 questions, I recognize that it was perhaps somewhat complicated.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order.

We are talking about Bill C-55, not the fact that the PQ lost an election because someone paid more than, what, \$1,000, and they lost their nation by \$200. That is irrelevant to the discussion. They beat the same old tired drum all the time, and they have ample opportunity to. Could we at least be relevant and talk about this bill and what it means now and not this tired old—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I will ask members when debating on this particular bill to stick as closely as possible to the actual provisions in the bill.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Réal Ménard: Mr. Speaker, I ask that my colleague stay calm, listen to my speech and allow me to speak. I am talking about a democratic referendum. That is what we are talking about: democracy. I ask that my colleague show some respect and stay calm. His intolerance explains why the NDP does not have a foothold in Quebec.

I was saying that democracy is very important and that Quebec has its Referendum Act. This legislation was put into use in 1980 and in 1995. To our colleagues in the NDP, I would say that the Bloc Québécois is not convinced that the bill, as presented, will encourage voter participation. We do not think it is enough to increase the number of days of advance polling. It is political cynicism that is keeping people away from the polls. In this context of social disengagement, we have to do a little more than just increase the period set aside for advance polling.

I will give a few examples. Some positive measures were taken during the second-last election. In every one of our ridings, the Chief Electoral Officer hired people who canvassed youth. These people had to convince youth to add their name to the voters list. Young people tend to vote less than others. Not only would we have liked incentives like that to be included in the bill, but we think other measures could have been taken in Bill C-55 that would be more likely to promote voter participation. For example, would it not have been wiser to ask for more polling stations?

Earlier, the hon. member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel made an important point. In his riding, urban centres are quite spread out. Would it not be better to add more polling stations than increase the period designated for advance polling?

The Bloc Québécois is also concerned about the many errors in the register of electors. Quebec has already held a debate on mandatory voter cards. At the federal level, for some elections, it was even possible to register on voting day with two pieces of identification. All this encourages voter turnout. Obviously, there must be guarantees with respect to the potential for fraud. It is very important to question the integrity of the register of electors.

There must be a debate within society. We must ask ourselves why fewer citizens are casting their vote. Is it because they do not trust the leaders? Is it because it is not easy for them? Perhaps election day should be a statutory holiday. That way, people would have more time to vote. Is it because we should have fixed election dates? These are questions that come to mind. The Prime Minister has some very firm ideas about this. Personally, I tend to think that fixed election dates are an advantage. As a matter of fact, the Bloc Québécois, in its wisdom, supports the bill that would set fixed election dates. They would be an advantage, because they would shield us from partisan vagaries.

Twice, the Liberals called elections, called Canadians and Quebeckers to the ballot boxes, before the four-year term was up. In Jean Chrétien's case, it was three years.

• (1600)

He did it because he thought his party would win, because it was easier for his party.

This bill was drafted in response to concerns about voter participation. It would be better to bring in fixed election dates. It seems to me that in Canada—perhaps my colleagues can help me out here—there are already two provinces that have fixed election dates: Ontario and British Columbia, if I am not mistaken. There is no reason for the federal government not to have fixed election dates. I am trying to come up with relevant ways to improve voter turnout.

One day, I sat in for my party whip on a committee. I had the pleasure of speaking with the former Chief Electoral Officer, Mr. Kingsley. I went to a meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to meet with him, and I asked him about the connection between poverty and voter turnout. It is clear that in Hochelaga, where I am from, voter participation is lower than the national average. The national average is 65%, but voter turnout in Hochelaga is only 55%. We have to consider the possibility that there is a correlation between the poverty index and voter turnout. I think there is. When people have trouble meeting their basic needs—food, clothing and shelter—they are much less likely to care about getting involved in our public institutions.

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In the end, what does it mean to vote? To vote is to assert one's citizenship. This is why some people believe that, until Quebec achieves sovereignty, we cannot truly have Quebec citizenship. I must admit, I am pretty close to sharing that point of view. This does not mean that people cannot take an interest in the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, participate in the operations of the National Assembly, be familiar with Bill 101, and know the history of Quebec. But, clearly, true citizenship is conferred by the features of sovereignty. This is certainly one more reason to strive for sovereignty.

Indeed, there is a rather tenuous link between social disengagement and participation in democratic institutions, and this should make us reflect on how we can address poverty. I know, for example, that the hon. member for Sherbrooke—and I can never thank him enough—tabled a motion a few years ago to add a provision to the Canadian Human Rights Act to prohibit discrimination based on social condition. I was not surprised by his actions. I know how much the hon. member for Sherbrooke cares about such issues. He is an asset to the social democratic wing of the Bloc Québécois, and I would like to thank him once again.

In closing, we are not convinced that we will support the bill, nor are we convinced that it is enough. The bill lacks the measures and the vision needed to really increase voter turnout. We would have liked to see more polling stations and greater incentives, including a better register of electors and the ability to reach out to voters who are more likely to disengage socially.

• (1605)

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, first, I want to congratulate the hon. member for Hochelaga on his presentation. I also congratulate him because, this past weekend, he was selected unanimously as our party's candidate in Hochelaga to run again at the next general election. The Bloc Québécois grassroots in Hochelaga have again put their faith in this member, whose competence and experience are unique.

My colleague presented a very nice picture of Hochelaga, and I would like to hear his thoughts on voter turnout, because this is what is most important.

In Quebec, we made changes to the advance voting process. Before the last provincial election, in March, Quebeckers who wanted to vote in advance had to give a reason to be allowed to do so. Now, they no longer have to give a reason to be able to vote in advance. This resulted in a higher advance poll turnout, but the turnout for the general election changed by a mere 0.1%. So, this measure did not have a significant impact in that regard.

I wonder if the hon. member for Hochelaga could give us his thoughts on how we could encourage more citizens to vote, including in Hochelaga, where, in some areas, people seem to be experiencing greater difficulties.

• (1610)

Mr. Réal Ménard: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel. I would like to congratulate him on having been appointed our party's chief organizer. I know that he will do his very best to ensure that the Bloc Québécois not only keeps its seats, but also wins more seats in the next election.

Once again, I think that this is a timely issue. In places where the poverty rate is high, people disconnect from society for all kinds of reasons. These are people who have had a hard time professionally, people who have mobility issues, people who are illiterate, and so on. These are all factors that cause people to participate less in their democracy.

Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, which is located between downtown Montreal and the east end, includes five neighbourhoods. I represent part of Rosemont, which is wealthier, part of south central Montreal, which is poorer, and all of Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, which, from 1898 to 1918, was an independent city that merged with Montreal some time later. People's opinions on mergers in this part of Montreal are deeply rooted. In addition to Rosemont, south central Montreal and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, I have part of Bourget, which is mostly upper middle class people. The Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood is home to real, authentic, courageous people who participate in community life and have a reputation for getting involved in their community and recreation. My neighbourhood would be very different, the social fabric would be very different without recreation groups like Jeunes Sportifs Hochelaga, Notre-Dame-de-L'Assomption, Centre Communautaire Hochelaga, to name but a few, that liven up my neighbourhood.

Once again, we have to ensure that we are making it easy for people to do their civic duty and to come out when it is time to elect representatives to their legislative bodies.

* * *

MESSAGE FROM THE SENATE

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I have the honour to inform the House that a message has been received from the Senate informing this House that the Senate has passed the following public bill to which the concurrence of this House is desired: Bill S-6, An Act to amend the First Nations Land Management Act.

* * *

CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-55, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (expanded voting opportunities) and to make a consequential amendment to the Referendum Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Ms. Monique Guay (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would also like to commend my colleague on his speech. Since he is from Montreal, his situation is different than mine. My constituency is on the north shore in the Montreal area.

I have five municipalities to cover, including a regional capital, and the realities are truly different from one municipality to another. It is much easier to cover a regional capital than the small surrounding municipalities, because sometimes there are great distances to travel from one end of the municipality to the other. We therefore need more polling stations for people to get to.

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The problem we often encounter is the absence of public transit, which is not an issue in Montreal. In our regions—except for the regional capital of Saint-Jérôme—there is no public transit to allow young people to travel to vote, if they want. It is extremely difficult to get a high voter turnout depending on where the polling station is located. This entire matter should be reviewed.

Reference was made to low voter turnout among our youth. Should we not consider having polling stations in CEGEPs, and allowing voting on more than one day? Should we not consider having polling stations in universities, where students could register? Students often come from other cities. If the fixed election date is in the fall, they are in school then. They do not necessarily go back home over the weekend, because they have homework to do. Also, if they got to register right at the university, that might act as an incentive to vote. The very low voter turnout among high school, college and university students is definitely a concern.

I have nothing against two additional voting days, but I do not think that will boost voter turnout. We know that, at the federal level, from the moment that a candidate's nomination paper has been filed with and approved by the Chief Electoral Officer, one may already vote at any time at the office of the Chief Electoral Officer. The name of the candidate may even be written by hand, if the ballots are not ready. It has been done, and it has been a common occurrence where I come from.

However, there is a single office of the Chief Electoral Officer and it is normally located downtown in the regional capital. People from outside that area are not likely to be able to easily get there to vote.

We also know that one can vote by mail. There are various ways one can vote. Many mechanisms are already in place at the federal level to allow people to vote.

Someone mentioned ID card and the voter cards earlier. There have been discussions for quite some time about the idea of a voter card for everyone. Voters would only have to show that card, instead of having to produce two pieces of identification.

I will give an example. I have an 18-year-old son who voted for the first time in my last election. However, he still does not have all the cards that we have, as adults. He still does not have a driver's licence, he has only his health insurance card. I had to identify him because I was asked to. He was asked for two cards at the polling station.

So this is a problem for young people. It is also a problem for some people who live below the poverty line and who may not have all these cards and all these tools to be able to go and vote. They will not take the trouble to go, either, because they will tell themselves that they would not be able to vote in any event.

When the bill is sent to committee, we may have to consider this possibility and examine it properly to be sure that we include it in Bill C-55 and improve the bill.

This bill is of some value, but it is very slight. It talks about adding only two days. There is not a lot in Bill C-55 that would prompt us to vote for it with any great enthusiasm because it is changing a lot of things.

● (1615)

On the contrary, it is not changing much. We said that we would vote for this bill at second reading to be able to study it further and in greater depth in committee. I hope that some ideas will come out of that committee for improving the bill.

There is also the whole question of the lack of interest in politics, as several of my colleagues have said. When it comes to federal politics, fewer people are voting. People have lost interest. Since 1993, I have taken part in five election campaigns. I have to say that I have been disappointed several times. There was even one time when the turnout fell to 52%, and that was disturbing because the percentage of people voting should be higher than 52%. This means that there is a lack of interest in politics, in representation in Parliament and in political parties. There is also a lack of interest in ideologies. This is disturbing. We have to find a way of restoring our fellow citizens' interest in voting.

The last campaign we had lasted almost 59 days. In the middle of that campaign we had Christmas and New Year. That made no sense. In my riding, during the holiday period, people had things planned for Christmas and New Year's Day. They had family and other people coming to visit. Of course people talk politics over Christmas, whether as a family or in other groups, but I have to say, sincerely, that the volunteers and people working on the ground needed a bit of time off to be able to celebrate with their families.

In my riding, we decided to take a break for those two periods. It made no sense to force volunteers to work on Christmas Day or New Year's Day. They are volunteers, they give their time, energy and enthusiasm to our election campaigns. We have to take all that into account too.

I am very happy with Bill C-16, which will give us fixed election dates so long as the government is not defeated because it is a minority government. Fixed election dates are a necessary and much less partisan approach. People might listen a bit more to what we have to say. People might have more confidence in us if the government cannot take advantage of being ahead in the polls to call an election and hand out goodies. We know how that works. As I said, I have been through five election campaigns.

I think that there will be some basic changes in this bill. I can well understand what my colleague from Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel goes through. He has a huge riding. Mine is a little smaller, but I still have to deal with five large municipalities. If we want to make services available and heighten people's awareness, we have to provide them with more places to go and vote. I know that my colleague has to deal, just as I do, with a lack of public transit. People must have a car. But not everybody has one. Poor people do not have the means. Not all young people have access to one. For my part, I went to get my son so that he could go to an advance poll in the last election in Quebec. If I had not done that, he probably would not have gone to vote. It is very important, therefore, to raise the awareness of our youth and do so while they are still very young and in secondary school. They should be told what politics is all about. I am not saying they should be able to vote at a younger age, but they should be informed in school.

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•(1620)

I have toured around some schools. I have been invited to speak about politics and tell young people what a day in Parliament is like and what an MP is. They do not really have any idea. It should be part of what we do and our responsibilities as MPs to go and talk to young people in secondary school—I do not mean grade 7 but students who are 14 or 15 years old—so that they can ask questions, get informed and understand. They should also be invited to come here and see what happens. A lot of schools send students. They visit Parliament and see question period. That is not always so great, however, because they see us get very excited. It is not necessarily a good example, but I believe that we can connect with our young people.

I was also invited to visit a political science class in a CEGEP to answer questions from the students and to tell them about the work of an MP, in their riding and also in Ottawa. So, it is important to discuss these matters and to find a way to connect with them.

There are also people who cannot get out and who must vote at home because they have a serious disability. My returning officer personally went to a house to allow someone to vote in her own home. That was a fine deed. People may vote as they please, but everyone has an absolute right to vote and I believe we have to maintain that.

However, I do not believe that simply adding two days, as the bill proposes, will be enough. A great many other changes are needed. There are things missing from this bill. We must also avoid scandals and observe the electoral laws. Spending limits must be enforced and there must not be any slush funds. That is extremely important. Our transparency must be crystal clear. That is, perhaps, what will lead people to take a greater interest in politics. They will then say that their politicians are much more honest than they thought. They will look at us in a new way. I believe that is how we should engage in politics. I have always practised politics in an honest manner and I believe it pays dividends.

There is a great deal of work to be done with the media in terms of awareness. Returning officers already do that work. However, on the media side—television, radio, etc.—even more information is needed, perhaps targeted at young people and specific age groups, with very precise messages to seize their attention and give them a desire to vote. In addition, there is all the work that we do. When people hear about things like the sponsorship scandal, that does not help us, and it leaves people disgusted with politics and politicians. We all felt that in the last election campaign. That kind of thing should never happen again. I hope it will not happen again and that, in future, the rules will be tightened up to avoid things like Option Canada and the endless list of scandals.

Scandal after scandal, people are disillusioned and fed up with politics. They say that politics are not necessary and, in any case, politicians are all the same. It is a bit disappointing to hear people say that. There is not much use trying to explain because that is often the answer we get. I think that politics have to be made more accessible insofar as what we do is concerned. We are making progress. We are doing it by means of the householders we send out to inform our people four times a year. What we do here has to be made known, though, in a much more general way so that people

really understand. If I am talking with someone about Bill C-55, he has to be able to understand exactly what that is.

•(1625)

Not everyone is highly politicized, of course, but I think that we can connect with people more and get through to them.

I am looking forward to this bill going back to committee because I think it can be improved. All the parties in the House surely have important suggestions to make. We can make them in a harmonious atmosphere because they are intended to make it easier for our fellow citizens to go and vote.

What I have seen in some places did not make sense. Polling stations were chosen in inaccessible places, sometimes even churches or little chapels when it was bitterly cold outside. People could not even get inside to wait. They had to stay outside in the middle of the winter in a snowstorm or in temperatures of 30° C below zero. That is unacceptable. We need to review all that. We have to make sure places are found. I know that people cannot vote in schools in federal elections, but in Quebec they do. It is much easier that way. As a result, locations have to be found all over the place and sometimes they are very inaccessible. This is something that we really should review for Canadians. One result of all this is that people get angry. They go back home and say they will not vote because it does not make sense to be forced to wait outside for half an hour when it is 30° C below zero.

Then there is the whole issue of homeless people, to which my colleague referred earlier. It is important that these people also be allowed to vote. A voter's card would be the best means to allow them to vote in an election. We must reach out to these people, and we must also find an effective way to do so. They must have a say in the election of their government, which is going to develop policies that may save them, or help them move away from homelessness. There are associations that look after these people, but we must do more to encourage them to vote.

In conclusion, I personally think that Bill C-55 does not do much. I hope the government will be open to constructive amendments that will truly increase the chances of seeing these people vote in large numbers. We must fare better than we currently do in this regard. Indeed, it is rather disappointing to see that only 52% of the population voted. Even when we win, it is disappointing to see that people are turning away from politics.

So, as I said, I hope we can improve this bill by using everyone's input, and by using our experience both in Parliament and in the community, because we also work in the community.

I am currently working as the assistant to our new election campaign director. We talk to people and we hear what they think. They have good ideas. We must follow up on these ideas with concrete measures. Of course, we should not expect miracles. We will not achieve a 100% voter turnout. However, the more the voter turnout increases, the better we can do our work as representatives of the public, as elected people, as members of all the various parties and, in my case, as member of the Bloc Québécois.

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•(1630)

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Malpeque, Canadian Wheat Board; the hon. member for Madawaska—Restigouche, Summer Career Placements Program.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to begin by congratulating the hon. member for Rivière-du-Nord on her excellent presentation. I am currently touring Quebec with my hon. colleague, who is the associate senior organizer. I therefore have the pleasure of travelling around the province with her.

The objective of any politician should always be the same: to ensure that the largest possible number of citizens of voting age exercise their right to vote—it is so important in our democratic system. The only way to assess how a government or the parliamentary system is working is by using one's right to vote. All too often and for all sorts of reasons, lawmakers and the government forget the large geographic size of Quebec, among other provinces.

The bill seeks to add voting days. Everyone knows that one may vote in advance, on the weekend before a general election. This bill is not adding any polling divisions or making voting easier for people.

The riding of Rivière-du-Nord is not as widely spread out, but this rather large riding includes several municipalities. I would like my colleague to explain how advance polling works, how her riding is divided and what the government could do to improve the situation in the future.

•(1635)

Ms. Monique Guay: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his question. I might add that it is truly a pleasure to be touring Quebec. We are learning so many things, because people have much to say and, as I indicated, they have a lot of good ideas to suggest.

Advance polling poses a problem in terms of the limited number of sites. There is not a variety of sites like on election day. That poses a serious problem. Take a municipality like Saint-Colomban, which covers a huge area. There is only one place where people can vote. This makes it very difficult to vote in advance, especially for people who do not have cars. It might be a better idea to add advance polling sites instead of adding voting days. There is a serious problem due to the fact there is only one voting site, and this site can be located anywhere. As I said earlier, people cannot vote in schools, hence the need to try to find other sites or some small place where voting can take place.

With regard to advance polling, there would have to be provision for additional staff. Very few people work at advance polls. Those who truly wish to vote early are forced to wait a very long time in order to cast their ballot. Perhaps we should concentrate on the following points to increase voter turnout: have more polling stations and hire more staff. At the office of the chief electoral officer, people

had to wait two hours to vote. That does not make sense. In Saint-Hyppolite, the polling station was a very small, unheated chapel. Voters waited outside and could not use the church pews. It is not pleasant to have to wait half an hour in -30 °C; some people did not go to vote. We need to take another look at that.

Bill C-55 is an opportunity to make some changes that would be much more worthwhile and enduring. This would be a greater incentive for our voters to go to the polls than just adding two extra days for voting. Adding two additional voting days is not the only solution. We could do that but I believe that other improvements are needed. There will definitely be some constructive suggestions to be made with regard to Bill C-55 when it goes to committee. In addition, witnesses such as the chief electoral officer of Quebec or of other provinces may have suggestions. We shall see. In any event, I believe we should improve the bill in order to reach out to as many voters as possible.

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak on Bill C-55, the title of which is An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (expanded voting opportunities) and to make a consequential amendment to the Referendum Act.

This bill comprises 14 pages, so I will settle for reading the summary.

Mr. Serge Cardin: Fourteen pages, to add two days.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Indeed, it does take a lot of text. My colleague from Sherbrooke is right, there are 14 pages to add two more days. The summary reads as follows:

This enactment amends the Canada Elections Act to increase the number of days of advance polling from three to five, and to increase the number of advance polling stations open on the last day of advance polling. It also makes a consequential amendment to the Referendum Act.

So, we have understood the purpose of this bill. I will begin by saying that the Bloc Québécois will be in favour of this bill, but there are far too many pages considering the objectives. In relation to the principal objective intended by the Conservative government, though, hon. members will understand there are too few.

First of all, as the chief organizer of the Bloc Québécois, I will attempt to make my comments very constructive. I merely wish to say that, in the 75 Quebec ridings, the Bloc Québécois has a tough political machine, as our opponents are well aware. We are the best organized political party, and the one most aware of all the problems that everyone can run into on election day.

Since 1993, we have been the party, each and every time, that obtains the majority of the Quebec seats here in the House of Commons. We will continue to do so, precisely because we are a formidable organization, with exceptionally generous workers and supporters in the 75 ridings of Quebec. Some of those ridings cover a huge area. I would like this aspect to have particular attention paid to it.

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It is true that it does seem worthwhile to have two more days, and to have an advance poll in each polling station on the Sunday preceding the Monday election day. Yes, at first glance, it seems worthwhile, and that is why we will be in favour of the bill and will attempt to make improvements to it.

I say it seems worthwhile, because the government's objective is to increase turnout. I believe—or at least I hope—that on this point all the parliamentarians in this House will have the full support of all the men and women of the Bloc Québécois deputation.

Our objective is precisely to ensure that as many persons as possible of voting age who are entitled to vote may make use of the only way we can pass judgment on the way democracy is being exercised in Canada or in Quebec: our right to vote.

The message today will be a constructive one. Obviously, the interests of the Bloc Québécois and of Quebecers are at stake. Our objective is, therefore, a simple one. Yes, it is a good thing to have two more days, including the Sunday prior to election day, when advance polls will be held in each polling station to be used on election day. This is a positive step.

However, on the other days of advance polling, including the weekend before the election, we would like to see a larger number of advance polling stations. That weekend has traditionally been the advance polling weekend. This is ingrained in people's minds. They know that the weekend before an election—not the Saturday and Sunday that immediately precede the Monday of the election but, rather, the previous weekend, that is the eighth and ninth days before the election—is advance polling weekend.

So, we must be able to increase the number of advance polling stations and the number of polling stations. Indeed, if we want to try to increase voter turnout, we must not merely say that there are advance polling stations, we must not merely tell people that they have the option of voting eight or nine days—that is either the Saturday or the Sunday—before election day, because they may not be available that weekend.

● (1640)

The quality of the voting services must also be similar to the ones that we have on election day. This is what is lacking here. Indeed, during the four days allocated for the advance polling process—because we are adding two days—the number of polling stations will be limited.

Advance polling stations are often few and far between. For example, in my riding of Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, the advance polling station is located in Thurso. This means that the citizens of the eight municipalities surrounding the town of Thurso must sometimes travel over 70 or 80 kilometres to vote in advance. This does not make any sense in 2007, because people have to travel by car, which is a major drawback. Moreover, when an advance polling station is centralized, this means longer waits, because a larger number of voters use it.

Having to drive 80 kilometres and then wait for two hours to vote in advance is in and of itself a deterrent that sometimes seems deliberate. This has happened too often in the past, and I am tempted to say that it may not have been by accident. We can blame returning

officers for not setting up enough advance polling stations, but the fact remains that it is the government that gives them their budgets.

Bill C-55 could have included a provision for more polling stations. Adding another polling day the Sunday before voting day in each polling station is a step forward. However, they could have increased the number of polling stations and polling divisions for the other four days of advance polling. The Bloc Québécois is seeking fairness so that all citizens, regardless of where they live in Quebec—and we are working for the rest of Canada too—can have the same opportunity to vote in advance at polling stations.

I want to highlight that because some of the numbers are worrisome. Since the 1980s, voter participation in federal elections has plummeted by 10%. Dropping from 75% to 63% or 64% is serious. That means that in 10 years, 10% of the population lost interest in politics. What is even more worrisome is the fact that people under 24 have the lowest participation rate.

We have to be able to tell our young citizens, the young men and women who are the future of our society, that we are giving them every possible opportunity to exercise their right to vote for the first time. This is important for all kinds of reasons: they go to university, they work and they have a lot of responsibilities. That is why we have to increase the number of voting days, but we also have to give them the opportunity to vote close to home because young people often do not have cars and have to find other ways to get around.

Students go to universities in major urban centres that have public transit. When they go back to the regions—regions like mine—there is no public transit, so they cannot get around. Giving them more opportunities to exercise their right to vote is one way to encourage them to vote. Once again, Bill C-55 does not touch on this, which is unfortunate because this would have been the perfect time to do something about it if the government had wanted to. The Bloc Québécois will certainly propose amendments when the bill goes to committee, amendments that will increase participation overall and especially among young people.

It is not enough to increase the number of polling days; you must also have a message to deliver. Increasing the number of polling stations or divisions or advance polling days will not necessarily guarantee an increase in voter turnout.

● (1645)

The best proof of this was the last election in Quebec, where there was a change in advance polling. In Quebec, prior to March 2007, you had to have a reason to vote in advance. You had to say why you could not vote on election day. That was changed and advance voting increased. However, in terms of overall voter turnout—the total number of ballots cast on election day and in advance polls—only increased by a few one hundredths of a per cent.

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Once again, why do citizens not exercise their right to vote? This is due to the cynicism spawned by many situations. We saw an example this week in the House. Justice Grenier led an inquiry into the 1995 referendum expenses. \$539,000 was spent illegally. That was the general conclusion of Justice Grenier's report.

Another conclusion is that one whole part of the investigation could not take place, because it had to do with federal government spending, which was beyond Judge Grenier's mandate. Everyone understands this. The press understands. The Bloc Québécois, a great defender of the interests and values of Quebecers, is simply asking the government to investigate everything that was not covered by Judge Grenier. None of the parties, not the Conservatives, not the Liberals, not the New Democrats, no one except the Bloc Québécois asked for this investigation.

And then we wonder why citizens do not participate in elections. There was a denial of democracy. I am not talking about charges or anything. But as soon as we find that funds were spent illegally based on a law in a province, a big red light should come on here in Ottawa, especially when they participated in the event. But no, there is no red light here in Ottawa. They do not want an investigation. They do not want to know. They spent money illegally, but think what you will, it was for the cause, for Canadian unity or for anything else.

We should not encounter such situations in a democracy. Citizens should be able to make their own choices. Quite simply, the federal government denied citizens that opportunity in 1995. It did not allow the people of Quebec to make their choice freely. It bought ads, it spent money illegally on public opinion polls and other things. It tried to influence the vote and have its point of view adopted by not respecting Quebec's Referendum Act.

Regardless of whether I am a sovereignist or not, some things should not be acceptable in a democracy. A government cannot use money to try to influence democracy for any reason. Again, these are the situations that make people disengage. Maybe the Liberals, the Conservatives and the NDP want fewer people to vote. Maybe to them, the fewer the people who vote, the fewer they have to please and they can go on governing without having to satisfy the majority. That is what will happen. The way things are going, fewer people will vote in federal elections. This type of thing should never happen.

It is not true that this cynicism is disappearing because the Conservatives are in power. I would like to give a few examples and read a text, because it is worth mentioning. Please understand that these are not the sort of things that one would say without having verified the facts. Thus, the Conservative Party, contrary to what some people may think, is not the party of ethics and transparency. In a few months, the Conservative Party has accumulated a track record that attests to a lack of political will to respect the rules in place and to put an end to the culture of entitlement. As we all know, the current Prime Minister was the one who went on and on about the Liberals and their culture of entitlement during the election campaign.

• (1650)

This government appointed certain individuals to cabinet, and not just any individuals—talk about a culture of entitlement. It appointed

a former lobbyist, now the Minister of National Defence, to the head of the Department of National Defence. As a lobbyist, this minister worked with the largest weapons dealers, including BAE Systems, Raytheon and General Dynamics, for over a decade. And now, this same Minister of National Defence is granting \$20 billion in military contracts to the industries for which he recently worked as a lobbyist. That is how the government works today.

Another lobbyist, Sandra Buckler, is now the Prime Minister's director of communications. She worked for Royal LePage and the Harper government decided to maintain the contract with Royal LePage relocation services—

• (1655)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Order, please. The hon. member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, who is seated in the front row, has enough experience to know that when referring to members of this House, we use titles, not last names.

I do not scold new, inexperienced members for this kind of thing, but you know better. You used the Prime Minister's last name.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Speaker, I apologize. You are right.

Ms. Buckler, the Prime Minister's communications director, was hired in 2005 to meet with members of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, who were studying the possibility of referring this file to the Auditor General. One could be forgiven for thinking that Royal LePage was not paying Ms. Buckler to convince the members to refer the matter to the Auditor General. The Prime Minister's communications director worked on files that were connected to her former employer. This is the party that got itself elected on an ethics and transparency platform.

As I said, simply increasing the number of advance polling dates will not necessarily encourage people to vote. The government must set an example.

I have a few more things to say about contracts that have been handed out to friends. For years, the Conservatives complained that the Liberals were giving contracts to their friends. Yet they have done the same thing. This government awarded a communications contract to Marie-Josée Lapointe, who was part of the Prime Minister's transition team. The contract violated the spirit of the Federal Accountability Act because political staff are not eligible to receive government contracts for 12 months following their employment. They also used public funds for partisan purposes. In March 2006, the Conservative government awarded an \$85,000 contract to measure public support for the five election priorities. In July 2006, the Conservative government awarded a contract to Strategic Counsel to poll citizens on various political issues. The very partisan report indicated that the environment was a high priority.

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Thus, public funds were used for political purposes. The Conservative government criticized the Liberals for doing that very same thing. That is one of the reasons that so many people do not care about politics. That is one of the reasons for low voter turnout in federal elections. Once again, laws are being used and manipulated for partisan purposes. The Conservative government or the Liberal Party: it makes no difference.

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate and thank my colleague from Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel for his excellent speech.

In the opinion of my colleague, why is it that parties such as the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party cannot seem to entice people to vote? Is it simply because, once elected, these people are incapable of meeting the needs and aspirations of the public and therefore lose voter confidence completely?

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member said, and you have also said so yourself, that the Bloc Québécois has a remarkable campaign machine that sparks voter interest during an election campaign. The Bloc Québécois is a party with ideas and a party with definite power, which is what sparks the interest of voters. This is why voter turnout is so high, at least among people who vote Bloc Québécois. I would like to hear the member's comments on this.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Sherbrooke for his excellent question. Sometimes we do wonder. For us, in the Bloc Québécois, at least one thing is for certain: we are true to ourselves; we did not come here to take power. Our opponents find that very annoying. What should bother them instead is the fact that power often drives one to madness. They should take a good, hard look in the mirror. They should think back to when they were in opposition and then see what they have become now that they are in government. That would tell them what power does.

My colleague is asking me if the government of the day encourages participation. No, quite the contrary. As I said earlier, this government, like the Liberal one before it, is using public funds to conduct opinion polls. Polls determine what is likely to be acceptable and what is not. In the end, the government adjusts and uses what suits it best. Strategically, a large part of the population is often ignored in order to win an election. I indicated earlier that I was wondering if it might not suit the government that people do not go out to vote. I sincerely believe that it suited the Liberals when they were in power and that it suits the Conservatives now, the fact that people stay home. People do not follow politics too closely, paying attention only to major trends and thrusts. This allows the government to focus on catering to those it wants to get to vote.

By contrast, the Bloc Québécois is a mighty machine, because it has to work in the field, from home to home. We have to convince the voters that the only party that stands up for their real values and interests, without any ifs or buts, is the Bloc Québécois. They can rest assured that we will never be driven to madness by power.

• (1700)

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Mr. Speaker, there is a serious problem in my riding, Rivière-des-Mille-Îles. June 2 will mark my 10th anniversary in this House. With each election, voter turnout continues to decline. I do not have a problem because

my share of the vote continues to rise. But what I would like to know is why do voters not vote and, in the case of those that do, why do they change their vote? Instead of voting for the Liberals or the Conservatives, they vote for the Bloc. As for the others, they stay home.

My friend from Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel has raised an important point. We, the elected members, must regain the confidence of voters. We must get back out there and meet with them to prove, through our actions, the value of a member of Parliament. We had proof of that last night. A group of young students from my riding came to see us. I wish to thank you for welcoming them, Mr. Speaker. We must change the type of politicians that we are.

An hon. member: That they are.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Yes, that they are. Instead of giving gifts, handing out contracts and such things, we must not be afraid to roll up our sleeves and get down to work. I would like to hear what you have to say about that, my dear friend from Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Before giving the floor to the hon. member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, I would like to advise the hon. member for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles that we address our colleagues in the third person and not in the second.

The hon. member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles is absolutely right. The Bloc Québécois is a mighty machine. It may be imitated, but it will never be equalled, even though members of the other parties may try to do so. It is mighty because we are not out of touch with the public. The problem with the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party and the NDP nowadays, is that they devise mass strategies. They conduct opinion polls. They try to play politics through the media instead of making policy with the people.

That will always be the Bloc Québécois trademark. We will have the opportunity to joust with our adversaries during the next election campaign. They will understand that the Bloc Québécois is a mighty machine that is in touch with the people.

• (1705)

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Rivière-des-Mille-Îles said there was a problem. In my opinion, this is a common view among the Bloc members. I have had the same experience. The problem is that turnout is indeed decreasing, but, proportionally speaking, it is also decreasing for the Conservatives and the Liberals. I have to humbly admit that my majority increases.

If the Liberals and the Conservatives were able to interest people in their policies, in my riding they could get another 15,000 votes each. Nonetheless, I would still have the honour of representing the people of Sherbrooke.

What can these parties do to increase voter turnout?

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Sherbrooke for his question.

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The answer is a simple one: they should listen to the Bloc Québécois, the only party in this House that has no aspirations to be in power, but that defends Quebecers unequivocally. They need only do the same for their fellow citizens and their results will be the same as the Bloc's are in Quebec, that is, one majority after another. I am proud to be a member of the Bloc Québécois. It will be the same thing in the next election campaign. What is needed is to be close to the public, not to the lobbyists like the Liberals and the Conservatives.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): Mr. Speaker, because we are speaking about voter turnout, although that is not in any way the subject of this bill, I would like my colleague to speak about voter participation in the 1995 referendum. A lot of people who voted perhaps ought not to have. There was an exemplary turnout, a very high rate, an indication that the issue was one of concern to many Quebecers.

That was a very murky period, and even today the Prime Minister was asked to carry out an investigation into this matter. He still refuses to do so. I would like to know my colleague's thoughts on this.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Speaker, a very quick reply. In the last referendum, some people managed to vote when they were not entitled to. We learned today that the newly elected premier of Prince Edward Island was among them. He voted in the 1995 referendum. That is the image Quebec has of Canada.

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise this afternoon with the firm intention of helping increase public participation in politics.

Lower voter turnout is indeed a major concern. Year after year, this pattern is increasingly obvious. It is almost dramatic. When we look at the election results, we see that the party in office often represents only a minority of voters. This means that its actions often do not reflect the public's expectations and aspirations.

That is why the Bloc Québécois will, of course, support the principles of this bill. We cannot oppose virtue, particularly since I try to be virtuous every day. That may be the reason why my majority increases from election to election.

This bill seeks to increase voter turnout. It proposes to add two additional days to the advance polling period, that is the two Sundays that precede polling day. The fact is that, for several years now, and despite major improvements to the Canada Elections Act to increase voter turnout, the percentage of voters has gone down instead of going up.

Will simply providing two additional days and increasing the number of polling stations be enough to increase voter turnout?

I doubt it, because people now have more options. This was particularly the case at the last federal election. The situation has improved, because people could go and vote at almost any time. They could do so when running an errand by simply stopping at the polling station. Moreover, they no longer have to invoke reasons to vote in advance. In the past, people had to give valid reasons to vote in advance. Some may have made up reasons to be able to vote in advance. However, now, there is practically nothing preventing

people from voting, unless they are away on a business trip, and even then. The envelope system allows them to vote.

There is a fundamental problem that will definitely not be solved by merely adding two additional days and a few polling stations to vote. However, this will, in some cases, make it easier to vote for people who had already decided that they would do so. It will make things easier and simpler for them.

Using my riding as an example, I have always maintained that it is one of Quebec's, and Canada's, most beautiful ridings. My constituency office is no more than some 10 or 15 minutes from all points in my riding. Voting on election day is easy, when everyone is no more than 10 or 15 minutes from a polling station. It is usually less, because there are nevertheless several polling stations. They can get to the polling stations quickly and take the time to vote.

Yet, voter turnout in my riding was similar to that of the rest of Canada. Nation-wide, turnout was 64.7% during the last election, while in Sherbrooke it was 63.4%. Thus, it was a little lower than the Canadian average. Out of 81,000 registered voters, 51,900 exercised their right to vote.

Here is what this means, as I was saying earlier, and this is no joke, or if it is a joke, there is some truth to it.

● (1710)

If the Liberal and Conservative candidates had made an effort, or if they had shown that elements of their politics fulfilled the aspirations and needs of voters, they might have been able to capture the interest of these voters and—as I said earlier—motivate 10,000 or 15,000 people to vote and participate in the election process, in order to have a say after the election. In any case, I am thrilled to once again represent the people of Sherbrooke.

Although voter turnout was a little low, the people of my riding were nevertheless motivated to vote. However, the people who, in the past, supported the parties that have been in power recently, whether Liberal or Conservative, preferred to stay at home. Why?

An hon. member: Oh, oh!

Mr. Serge Cardin: Yes, but they could have gone and voted. Mr. Speaker, please tell him that they could have gone and voted and I would still be here.

Government Orders

You know what happened: politicians lost a great deal of credibility. This happened to the Liberals mainly because of Everest's peak, as I often call it, or the tip of the iceberg: the sponsorship scandal. You know what happened: the Liberals lost all credibility. Today, we have a minority government formed by the Conservative Party, which bears no resemblance to the former Progressive Conservative Party, which rose from the ashes of the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance. A totally different party has emerged, one that does not at all reflect the values of the majority of Quebecers or Canadians. Naturally, election promises were made and the easiest ones were carried out quickly. However, in some cases, the government ripped up its promises.

What are citizens watching all this to think? Some still call themselves federalists—there are a few left in Quebec and in my riding. These citizens wonder who to vote for: the Liberals or the Conservatives; in either case, voters believe that the politicians say whatever they want and then do the opposite afterwards. This is not motivating. Fortunately, some will vote nonetheless and an increasing number of voters are choosing the Bloc Québécois. Its base of supporters is growing steadily thanks to voters disappointed with the Liberals and the Conservatives.

Increasing voter turnout in the next election should be an objective. After this government, elections will be held regularly every four years, if one party is able to garner a majority. I am almost convinced that this House will have successive minority governments for quite some time. Why? Because the desire within Quebec for sovereignty is growing and it is fairly certain that the Liberals will never form a majority government again, nor will the Conservatives. In my opinion, there is a greater chance that the NDP will begin to elect members in Quebec at the expense of the Conservatives and the Liberals.

I vaguely remember an NDP being elected in Quebec. It is not impossible because the Liberals and the Conservatives are no longer capable of keeping their clientele. It is not necessarily derogatory to refer to voters as the clientele. What is worse is the goods they are being sold, whether they are Conservatives or Liberals.

• (1715)

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Serge Cardin: The hon. member said things that should not be repeated because there may be a chance that the Liberal Party will regain power in the medium term. Nonetheless, that is not the case.

Voter turnout needs to increase. How? This can be achieved through information, healthy information. For politicians who are not Bloc members, how can they ensure transparency in the promises made during an election campaign to avoid disappointing the public and to make the public interested in voting?

I think it is natural that some people still vote for the Liberals and the Conservatives in Quebec. I do not hold that against them. That is what democracy is all about. However, their numbers are decreasing. That is good, because then, maybe, voter turnout will increase. At least the Bloc Québécois is doing everything it can. In addition to being a mighty machine, the Bloc Québécois also has a strong tendency to hit the streets and talk to people and listen to their

concerns in order to truly meet their needs and expectations. It is important to listen to them.

Since 1998, some candidates I have met have said, as the Conservatives are increasingly saying, that the Bloc cannot do anything. That is a lesson and it may be part of their code. When people hear such comments, they lose all confidence in the Conservatives. The people of Quebec are well aware that the Bloc Québécois is the only party in Quebec that protects the interests of Quebecers. It is also the only party that tries to respond to the most profound and legitimate aspirations of the Quebec people, and that is to have a sovereign Quebec. We will achieve that with voter turnout. We will show that whether it is a provincial election or a federal election, voter turnout increases when it comes to supporting the sovereignist party and, of course, when it is a matter of sovereignty.

Despite some bumps in the road, like those that occurred recently in Quebec, the foundation of sovereignty and the people who believe in it keep getting stronger. In addition to being a consequence of the quality of the idea and the people who represent it, it is also because of what the Liberals and Conservatives have been telling people, almost since the beginning of time. All of this helps shed some light on the federalist's tendency to oppose the sovereignty of the nation of Quebec.

Voter participation is important, and even more important for our youth. The young people we meet seem rather eager to subscribe to our vision for Quebec, that is, sovereignty, but they tend to forget to go vote. Voter turnout attests to this. Comparing young people under the age of 24 to people aged 58 and older, voter turnout in the latter category is double. Young people are able to get around easily and vote quickly. Furthermore, there are often polling stations right in their schools. We need to get them interested. The Bloc Québécois already does this. We also plan to increase our efforts with this age group, because young people think about the future and want to identify themselves with people who do not tell them tall tales, but rather with people who tell them the truth, who are transparent and want to work with them towards the advancement of our society in the modern world. In Quebec, the modern world means sovereignty.

• (1720)

It is not only in Quebec and Canada that we are seeing considerable decreases in voter turnout. We are seeing this even in countries where voting is mandatory.

Should we consider mandatory voting for Canada or Quebec? Have we already thought about this? Perhaps my colleagues could respond. But democracy means freedom. Sometimes, we value our freedom so much that we fail to fulfill our obligations, including voting.

Our reflection on the matter must not stop here. We must seriously think about not only adding more voting days, but also adding more polling stations, and increasing voter turnout through a positive attitude and an honest approach. When we tell the public that we will represent them and defend their interests, and then follow through on it, this can only boost voter turnout.

I therefore urge the remaining Liberals and Conservatives in my riding who did not vote to do so in large numbers. This will only motivate me further to convert the federalists to our great cause, the sovereignty of Quebec.

• (1725)

[English]

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank, immensely, the interpreters who are working in those little booths back there without whom I would not be able to communicate with those people. I am unfortunately a unilingual English speaking Canadian and they appear to be unilingual French speaking, since they usually do not speak the other languages.

I want to correct the Bloc members. Several of the members have indicated that they are the greatest thing going, that all the Bloc supporters come out in droves and vote for them and so on. I, being a little inclined mathematically, went to the website of Elections Canada and looked at the numbers. I will not bore the House with the details, but these are the percentages.

In the province of Quebec the Liberals got 21% of the vote, the Conservatives got 25% of the vote and the Bloc got 42% of the vote. It looks to me as if their premise is right. Their supporters do show up and vote for them, and for that they are to be commended.

However, I want to have them compare that with my wonderful province of Alberta. I will go in increasing numbers. The Bloc got 0% of the vote, the Liberals got 15.3% of the vote and the Conservatives in my province got 65% of the vote.

Therefore, enough of that saying it is members of Parliament who serve their constituents who get their voters out. Clearly, in Alberta we do as Conservative members.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Cardin: Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the Conservative Party and the colleague who garnered 65% of the votes. However, they were lucky. It was a close call. We can only imagine how different the statistics would be had the Bloc fielded candidates in his province.

In the past few elections, people from other provinces showed interest and asked what we were waiting for to get the Bloc going in their province. They have federalist representatives whom they support. I am obviously speaking of people from other provinces and not of myself. However, they would like something new, a bit of a change from the old parties that feed them all sorts of lines. The pendulum is definitely swinging between the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party.

It is just incredible. The Conservatives obtained 65% of the vote but are still in the minority. What do they need to have a majority? Do they need 100% or close to that, as did Fidel Castro in Cuba?

I am seriously thinking about opening a Bloc Québécois franchise in their province.

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It being 5:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

Adjournment Proceedings

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1730)

[Translation]

PERFLUOROCTANE SULFONATE VIRTUAL ELIMINATION ACT

The House proceeded to the consideration of Bill C-298, An Act to add perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) to the Virtual Elimination List under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999, as reported (with amendments) from the committee.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): There being no motions at report stage on this bill, the House will now proceed, without debate, to the putting of the question of the motion to concur in the bill at report stage.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.) moved that Bill C-298, An Act to add perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) to the Virtual Elimination List under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999, be concurred in.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): 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 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 98, a recorded division stands deferred until Wednesday, June 6, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

[English]

Mr. Ken Epp: Mr. Speaker, I am gaining a bit of a reputation for doing this on various occasions, but I am sure that if you would seek it you would find an eager unanimous consent to see the clock as 6:30 p.m.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

Adjournment Proceedings

[English]

CANADIAN WHEAT BOARD

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the question I raised in question period relates to the Government of Canada using a fraudulent vote, manipulated by the government itself to get the results it wanted. The minister, although he misinterpreted those results, used the results that he achieved to violate the spirit of the Canadian Wheat Board Act itself. The government failed to abide by democratic principles and put its proposed changes to the House where those changes could be fully debated and the consequences carefully examined. The consequences are increasingly seen to be extremely serious to farmers, to the Canadian Wheat Board and to Canada's international reputation.

The minister proposed regulations that will undermine the single desk selling authority of the Canadian Wheat Board and has proposed that those regulations take effect on August 1 of this year and, in so doing, has disregarded the threat this action has on the integrity of the contracts the Canadian Wheat Board has with its customers around the world. These are serious consequences in terms of the consequences on producers, on the Wheat Board and on Canada's international reputation.

Even the minister's own task force, appointed to undermine the Canadian Wheat Board, did not recommend the actions the minister is taking.

The task force report indicated that the Canadian Wheat Board could find itself in a legally liable position for contract violation. The report states:

The existing CWB may have to exercise restraint in entering into contracts that make commitments beyond the date of termination of the monopoly, to avoid a liability for the CWB II that it is unable to fulfil in the choice environment.

The point being that even the task force stated:

The Government, at an early date, announce its intention to end the monopoly for barley and start marketing choice for barley....

The reason for that being that the Canadian Wheat Board is a marketing institution that makes long term contracts and, hence, gained respect in the world as a reliable supplier, both in quality and on delivery.

As well, all reliable studies show that the Canadian Wheat Board has maximized returns back to primary producers.

Regardless of the facts, the government is taking marketing power away from producers and is putting the Wheat Board in jeopardy, the producers in jeopardy and the domestic and international companies in jeopardy, and we need some answers.

With the government's intent to end the monopoly on August 1, 2007, what will be the cost to the Wheat Board, both in dollars and in reputation? Has the government done any studies in terms of that? Is the government and the minister willing to compensate the Canadian Wheat Board and producers for losses as a result of the government's action?

• (1735)

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is great to be here today and it is especially great to hear the member opposite

actually giving credibility to the CWB II, suggested by the task force, and seeing it as a possibility. I do not ever remember him doing that before. I am excited to hear that and to see that he has moved along.

I was disappointed once again, though, to hear him toward the end of his speech defending the big grain companies against the farmers, the producers. Our producers are waiting with great expectation for August 1. Some of them have even asked for the date to be moved up so they can take advantage of the market ahead of that time. It is good to see farmers willing to move ahead, and this government certainly wants to move ahead with them.

The Liberal leader told us months ago that he was going to ask a question per day in the House on the Canadian Wheat Board. I cannot remember the last time the opposition asked a question on the Canadian Wheat Board, and I can tell members one thing, that is not leadership.

The hon. member is attempting to discredit a valid and fair vote, all the while impugning the reputation of a reputable accounting firm. The question that he asked in March had to do with the barley vote.

The questions that were asked in that barley vote could not have been more clear. Barley producers were asked, first, if the Wheat Board should retain its single desk for marketing barley, second, if they wanted to have a choice of who they sold to, and third, if the Wheat Board should get out of marketing barley entirely.

The hon. member said that he wanted Canadians to know that the ballots were numbered and traceable. What he did not say in his question was that the private company conducting the vote had said that the numbered ballots were used only to verify voter eligibility and that separate processes for the verification of the declarations and the tabulation of the ballots were established.

The member also stated that some producers were called to see which of their ballots they wanted counted. He neglected, as he often does, to mention an important fact, which is that the vote administrator had said that the inquiries were to verify the eligibility of farming entities and to confirm with the producer that the farming entity had not inadvertently submitted more declarations than it was eligible for. The administrator, KPMG, declared categorically that in no instance was a producer asked any questions about voting preference.

Finally, the member said in his question that there were no scrutineers from opposing camps. That is not true. Just so Canadians know the truth, I want to let the record show that the counting of ballots was performed in the presence of three senior municipal election officials from the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, who acted as scrutineers.

These scrutineers observed the opening of the sealed secrecy envelopes, the sorting of the ballots, the adjudication of all spoiled ballots, and the counting of the ballots. Each of the scrutineers confirmed in writing that they witnessed the entire ballot count and that they were satisfied that the process was conducted in an independent and objective manner.

Adjournment Proceedings

Therefore, the question on the ballot was clear and the voting process was independent and objective.

We know that some people do not like how barley producers voted, and the member for Malpeque is one of those people. While they may object to the process of the vote, the real issue is the results. Those show clearly that farmers want to have the freedom to choose how to market their barley.

The government respects what producers have said. Over 60% of producers want to decide how to market their own product. Their decision in favour of marketing choice is clear and the government intends to give them that opportunity in this coming crop year.

I know that farmers are excited about this. We look forward to working with them in those opportunities and choices that they will be making.

• (1740)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Let us keep it simple, Mr. Speaker. The Conservative government is developing a pattern of breaking trust.

On April 20, 110 days after the fact, the minister shut down the Canadian farm family options program and left thousands of farm families without financial means under the program that their financial advisers had told them to plan on. The Conservative government broke its word. It is that simple.

On this issue, the minister is now changing the rules of marketing barley under the Canadian Wheat Board in a timeframe that makes it impossible for the Wheat Board to live up to its contractual obligations. Its own task force told it so. The minister has caused potential legal liabilities to farmers, to companies, to the Canadian Wheat Board, and indeed to Canada's international reputation abroad. This is outrageous.

The Conservative government cannot be trusted, either in terms of democratic principles or in terms—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Speaker, what would the Liberals do? That is the real question. We have heard the Liberal leader say to the prairie provinces that he would ignore the plebiscite. Did he not say that he would roll back any changes?

What would the member for Malpeque do? Would he respect farmers and the choices they have made? I doubt it, because the history of the Liberal Party regarding farmers is one that farmers need to be afraid of. The House leader of the Liberals was the one in charge when farmers were locked up and jailed because they wanted to market their own products.

The problem is that the Liberals have no credibility on this file. Farmers fear them far more than they respect them. They look forward to working with Conservatives who will bring them the choice and the opportunity that they have never had before. It is an exciting time for farmers in western Canada in working with this Conservative government.

[*Translation*]

SUMMER CAREER PLACEMENT PROGRAM

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to participate in the adjournment debate on student programs. Last fall—in September—when the Conservative government decided to make drastic cuts to the old summer career placement program, it also decided to hurt several groups and organizations, small and medium size businesses, and, above all, many students who wanted to go back home and work there during the summer.

The Canada summer jobs program set up by the Conservative government was a real fiasco. The government created a fiasco, and then it was forced—as it said—to come back with a second round of funding. Indeed, the Conservative government panicked because of information provided by Liberal members. This reaction of panic clearly demonstrated that the government's managing of the Canada summer jobs programs was totally inadequate. This was an unacceptable situation that we had been condemning for months, only to be ignored by this Conservative government.

The government cannot say it has not been warned of the problems to come. Even though the government has come forward with a second round of funding, that does not necessarily mean work for students. Who is paying the price right now? As I said, not for profit organizations are paying the price, as are our cities, our towns, our small and medium sized businesses, and our students. They are the ones paying the price, not the government. The government has made mistakes that it is unable to admit. Today, people and organizations are paying the price.

Worse yet, a cabinet minister, namely the Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, claims that the problem with the Conservatives' student program is attributable to department officials. It is unacceptable for a minister to blame officials for a problem that the minister and his cabinet colleagues themselves have created.

It is important to remind ourselves of the Conservatives' federal accountability act, designed to address what they considered to be dramatic situations. Let me read this excerpt from the federal accountability action plan, which states: “Under the doctrine of ministerial responsibility, ministers are responsible and accountable to Parliament for all powers vested in them—”.

It is unacceptable for the Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency to pin the blame on officials from the Department of Human Resources and Social Development or from Service Canada. The Conservative government is making cuts to student initiatives, adversely affecting not for profit organizations and students. I cannot think of a better way to make sure that our regions empty out and fail to provide work for our students.

In this context, will the Conservative government finally recognize its mistake, its fault, and acknowledge the fiasco it has caused with its so-called summer career placement program? Will it recognize that we Liberals were right after all? Each time I have risen in this House to talk about the summer career placement program, I have done so to sound the alarm, and the government should have listened.

Adjournment Proceedings

Will the government finally admit its fault and recognize that it should have acted when the concern was raised—not yesterday or last week when it finally reacted in a panic, but when it was told about it, back in September of 2006?

• (1745)

[English]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Madawaska—Restigouche for returning to his question from the beginning of May.

A great deal has happened in the interim. Thousands upon thousands of Canadian students have been given quality work experiences this summer. Importantly, students who are getting grants this year will be getting positions that are higher quality, positions for more pay and for a longer duration than under the old Liberal program.

A great deal more has happened since the member first asked his question. Now the public is well aware of the Liberals' scare-mongering and misinformation about the cost of the program which they said was cut by \$55 million.

New Brunswickers now know that last year their province received \$3.7 million for not for profit opportunities. This year, New Brunswick also received \$3.7 million.

Across Canada, not for profit positions were funded to the tune of \$77.6 million. This year it will receive \$77.6 million.

The member should know by now that a great deal has happened in his region since he first asked the question. He should know that the new program is targeted to areas of high unemployment which benefited his region.

Perhaps the member will choose the rest of his words carefully. While the situation is still fluid at this stage, all indications point to the Madawaska-Restigouche region benefiting more from the new Conservative program in the first round than it ever did under his Liberals.

His constituents should certainly be happy that their new government is getting things done for them. I invite them to pay close attention to his remarks here and now, and measure them against results when all is final.

But even more has happened since the member first asked his question. As we all know, some organizations came forward to express concerns when they were not funded in the first round. Their new government took action.

The minister listened to community leaders and the concerns of the members of Parliament. He asked his department to look into why good organizations did not receive funding this year. He did ask them to accelerate the second round of funding. I am sure most Canadians would be hard pressed to picture the old Liberal government listening and responding to concerns.

Now, officials in the department have worked tirelessly to contact organizations and review their status. Many organizations are lauding the minister and this government for listening and responding so quickly. What has not changed since the member

asked his question is this government's commitment to the principles of the new Canada summer jobs program.

The new program is one that focuses on the students. We appreciate the concerns that have been raised. We appreciate the good work of these great organizations. But this program of the youth employment strategy.

We are proud that the new program brings the focus back to students. We are proud to have created better jobs for a longer duration and more pay. We are proud to emphasize quality work experiences in fields that help students and their career aspirations, and so are Canadians.

• (1750)

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Mr. Speaker, one thing is clear: it is thanks to the Liberal members here in Ottawa that a second round of funding happened at all. Without us, without our efforts during question period and without the pressure we put on the government, the second round would never have happened. It only happened because of the Liberal members here in Ottawa. I am proud to be one of them.

Let us be clear: when the minister answered the question, he said that the organizations that did not receive funding were shut out because they were my friends. It just so happens that a lot of my friends—as the minister put it—received funding in the second round.

Is that because the minister and his government finally recognized their mistake and acknowledged the fiasco that resulted when non-profits, SMEs and especially towns and cities were nearly all denied funding during the first round? Students ended up paying the price. The government must acknowledge its mistake.

[English]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Mr. Speaker, what is really important is how good this program is. It was so well received that even the *Montreal Gazette* editorial stated:

The Tories also took the right tack on the Canada Summer Jobs program...The previous program gave local MPs far too much say over who in their ridings got money to hire summer students, a system that was ripe for abuse.

We are focusing on creating jobs that would not be created otherwise. Perhaps this member's friends now in fact have created some jobs that meet the criteria. We want to provide funding for students that have long duration and provide high-quality work experiences. Maybe his friends have met that criteria.

We are proud of the program because it is about students and it is for students. The opposition is fighting to restore an old program that allowed MPs to have direct influence in how taxpayers' dollars were spent. We have ended this culture of entitlement. We maintained—

Adjournment Proceedings

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The parliamentary secretary should know that when the Speaker gets up, she sits down.

The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 5:52 p.m.)

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