



CANADA

House of Commons Debates

VOLUME 142 • NUMBER 017 • 2nd SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, November 15, 2007

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

CONTENTS

(Table of Contents appears at back of this issue.)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, November 15, 2007

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

● (1000)
[*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 one petition.

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Orders 104 and 114, I have the honour to present the third report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs concerning membership of committees of the House.

[*Translation*]

If the House gives its consent, I intend to move concurrence in the third report later this day.

[*English*]

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the House gives its consent, I move that the third report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs presented to the House earlier this day be concurred in.

(Motion agreed to)

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PETITIONS

INCOME TRUSTS

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present this income trust broken promise petition on behalf of Mr. George Soulis, from Toronto, Ontario, who remembers the Prime Minister boasting about his apparent commitment to accountability when he said the greatest fraud is a promise not kept.

The petitioners remind the Prime Minister that he had promised never to tax income trusts, but he recklessly broke that promise by imposing a 31.5% punitive tax which permanently wiped out \$25 billion of the hard-earned retirement savings of over two million Canadians, particularly seniors.

The petitioners therefore call upon the Conservative minority government to first, admit that the decision to tax income trusts was based on flawed methodology and incorrect assumptions; second, to apologize to those who were unfairly harmed by the promise; and finally, to repeal the punitive 31.5% tax on income trusts.

● (1005)

TAXATION

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present a petition from a good number of my constituents in Trinity—Spadina to the House of Commons that would allow trades persons and indentured apprentices to deduct travel and accommodation expenses from their taxable income, so they can secure and maintain employment at a construction site that is more than 80 kilometres from their homes.

We know that Canada is facing a labour shortage. There is no reason why people and working families, especially those that are in the construction trade could not be allowed this deduction. Many Mexican and Portuguese immigrants in my riding, for example, would love to have the kind of tax deduction that some of the employers can have, so that they can travel a bit of a distance to find work. Whether it is travel or hotel costs, they should be tax deductible, and this is what the petition is all about.

YOUNG OFFENDERS ACT

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to present a petition signed by over 500 petitioners calling upon the Government of Canada to abolish the Young Offenders Act. They would like to see the name of the young offenders published and hold the parents financially responsible for damages caused by their children or child.

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QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the following questions will be answered today: Nos. 38, 50, 60 and 116.

Routine Proceedings

[Text]

Question No. 38—**Hon. Robert Thibault:**

With respect to the Small Craft Harbours Program: (a) what criteria is used to determine what constitutes a “core harbour”; (b) what is the number of core harbours in the ridings of West Nova, Central Nova, Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley and South Shore—St. Margaret’s, respectively; (c) what is the total cost of program spending in the ridings of West Nova, Central Nova, Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley and South Shore—St. Margaret’s, respectively, for the fiscal year 2006-2007; (d) what is the total 2007 budget allocation for this program; (e) what is the total planned program spending for 2007-2008; (f) what percentage of small craft fishing harbours is currently in a poor or unsafe condition; and (g) what additional funds are required per year to bring all small craft harbours to an acceptable state of repair?

Hon. Loyola Hearn (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with respect to the small craft harbours program:

(a) Core harbours are harbours that are critical to the commercial fishing industry, and are either currently managed by harbour authorities or expected to be managed by harbour authorities in the future;

(b) there are 34 core harbours in the riding of West Nova, 26 in the riding of Central Nova, 5 in the riding of Cumberland-Colchester-Musquodoboit Valley and 50 in the riding of South Shore-St. Margaret’s;

(c) 2006/07 total cost of program spending in the riding of West Nova is \$2,594,891, in the riding of Central Nova is \$4,726,711, in the riding of Cumberland-Colchester-Musquodoboit Valley is \$23,979 and in the riding of South Shore St. Margaret’s is \$4,944,994;

(d) the total 2007 budget for the program is \$97.1M (excluding employee benefit plans);

(e) the total planned spending for 2007-08 is the same as the total national budget, which is \$97.1M (excluding employee benefit plans);

(f) as of October 2007, the percentage of SCH core harbours in poor or unsafe condition is 28%, or 209 of a total of 747;

(g) the SCH program estimates that \$35M is required to be added to the current SCH annual budget in order to ensure proper life cycle management of assets at core harbours.

Question No. 50—**Ms. Jean Crowder:**

With regards to commuter rail service on Vancouver Island: (a) how much money has the government spent in the past 20 years on the Vancouver Island E & N Rail corridor; (b) how many funding applications have been made to support commuter rail on Vancouver Island; (c) how many of those applications have been granted; (d) what was the amount of money granted; (e) how many of those applications were denied and why; and (f) what is the government’s current plan to promote commuter rail on Vancouver Island?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the response is as follows:

(a) The federal government has provided VIA with over \$35 million between 1987 and 2006 for the operation of VIA’s Victoria-Courtenay inter-city passenger service. No funding has been provided for a commuter rail service. Traditionally, the federal

government has not funded commuter services as they are the responsibility of municipal and provincial governments.

(b) No applications received

(c) No applications received

(d) No applications received

(e) No applications received

(f) While urban transit is a provincial/territorial and municipal responsibility, the federal government recognizes the vital role transportation plays in the well-being of Canada’s urban centres and communities, and its potential benefits. The Government of Canada is committed to working closely with other jurisdictions to ensure that communities have the best possible transportation systems by directly investing in infrastructure projects through the new infrastructure programs announced in budget 2007. As well, municipalities can use the one hundred percent GST rebate and gas tax fund for commuter rail infrastructure and equipment initiatives. Budget 2007 makes a historic investment of more than \$16 billion in infrastructure, bringing federal support under the new building Canada plan over the next seven years to a total of \$33 billion, including the funding provided in budget 2006. This summer, the transport, infrastructure and communities portfolio undertook discussions with the provinces and territories and the municipal sector regarding the new \$33 billion building Canada infrastructure plan and the operation of the new programs. The next steps will be to obtain Treasury Board approval of the funding programs, as well as identifying priorities, assessing projects, and negotiating the necessary agreements with the new terms and conditions for the funds. Throughout this process, funding will continue to be delivered through existing infrastructure programs, including the gas tax fund and the public transit fund.

Question No. 60—**Mr. Yvon Godin:**

With regard to the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages’ Preliminary Investigation Report of May 2007, “Investigation of Complaints Concerning the Federal Government’s 2006 Expenditure Review”: (a) when is the government going to provide certain documents that the Office requested; (b) why did the government delay in providing a definitive response to the written request for these documents; and (c) are the documents still confidential and, if so, why?

Hon. Vic Toews (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the response is as follows:

a) The documents requested on March 5th, 2007, by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages contain confidences of the Queen’s Privy Council for Canada, within the meaning of section 69 of the Access to Information Act and section 39 of the Canada Evidence Act, and therefore cannot be disclosed.

b) The documents requested were very specific and necessitated an exhaustive search by a number of stakeholders within the Treasury Board Secretariat of all documents on file related to official languages and the expenditure review decision making process. Once the pertinent documents were identified and compiled, they were carefully reviewed and assessed as to whether they could or could not be disclosed. Since the documents contain confidences of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, they could not be disclosed. A reply letter explaining this was provided to the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages on May 3rd, 2007.

c) The documents requested are confidential as they contain confidences of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and are thus protected from disclosure for a period of 20 years pursuant to section 69 of the Access to Information Act and section 39 of the Canada Evidence Act

Question No. 116—**Mr. Mario Silva:**

What programs, policies, and oversights does the Treasury Board use to ensure equal pay for equal work between men and women, as well as for minority groups?

Hon. Vic Toews (President of the Treasury Board, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, equal pay for equal work is ensured through the application of classification standards that results in the same remuneration for employees classified at the same occupational group and level.

As a result of efficient employment equity strategies, we have seen a significant increase in the number of women being recruited and promoted into professional and executive categories. This has allowed us to reduce the global gender wage gap for the core public administration.

We negotiate wages in good faith and endeavour to ensure that gender-based wage discrimination does not re-emerge in our wage-setting practices.

* * *

[English]

QUESTIONS PASSED AS ORDERS FOR RETURNS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if Question No. 29 could be made an order for return, this return would be tabled immediately.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Text]

Question No. 29—**Mr. Peter Julian:**

With respect to the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor Initiative (APGCI): (a) what are the specific initiatives and projects that comprise the APGCI; (b) what government departments are involved in the development and implementation of the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor; (c) how is the federal government coordinating with the provincial and municipal governments in the development and implementation of the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor; (d) which level of government has the primary responsibility for the development and implementation of the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor; (e) is there or will there be a separate body responsible for the implementation of the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor; (f) who does, or will, this body consist of; (g) how often does, or will, it meet; (h) what remuneration is offered to members of this body; (i) is there or will there be an ongoing consultation between the federal, provincial, and municipal levels of

Government Orders

government throughout the process; (j) is the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor being implemented according to a master plan and, if so, what is that master plan; (k) how much federal government funding has been committed annually to the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor; (l) what is the breakdown of federal government funding for each specific initiative and project; (m) how much private sector funding is estimated to be funneled into the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor; (n) what companies will provide that private sector funding; (o) how much provincial and municipal government funding has been committed to the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor; (p) who has been hired as a consultant by the federal government to develop and implement the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor and what is the amount of their annual compensation; (q) what consulting contracts have been awarded by the federal government to private sector companies; (r) are there funding criteria for the federal government in terms of financing other levels of government and, if so, what are they; (s) is there a governing body that will handle all the expenditures of the APGCI; (t) has there been an impact assessment of the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor (i) on the environment, (ii) on resulting greenhouse gas emissions and, if so, what are its findings, (iii) on resulting suburban sprawl and, if so, what are its findings, (iv) on sound and noise pollution in neighboring communities, and, if so, what are its findings; (u) what is the projected impact on local farmland as a result of the Asia-Pacific Gateway; (v) does the APGCI include a plan to shift transport from automobile to public transit and, if so, please provide details; (w) when will the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor be completed in its entirety; and (x) how many (i) Canadian workers and (ii) foreign workers will be hired to work on the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor?

(Return tabled)

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

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[Translation]

CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

The House resumed from November 14 consideration of the motion that Bill C-6, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (visual identification of voters), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to take part in this debate on voting with the face uncovered. The fact that this issue was brought up during the three byelections in Quebec is due in large part to the initiative of the Bloc Québécois. Decisions were then made by the Chief Electoral Officer of Quebec, during the Quebec election last March.

There was a great uproar in Quebec when the Chief Electoral Officer of Elections Canada, Mr. Mayrand, announced that he did not plan on using his power to address a loophole in the Canada Elections Act with respect to voting with the face covered. But the Chief Electoral Officer of Quebec used the power set out in section 19—if I am not mistaken—to fix a situation that went unnoticed by parliamentarians.

Government Orders

The people of Quebec were therefore especially upset by Mr. Mayrand's attitude and, throughout Quebec, people wanted him to reconsider his decision and take the necessary measures to ensure that voters vote with their faces uncovered. He would not do so, however, claiming that it was up to parliamentarians to correct the situation. His was a very weak argument, since the precedent had already been set, as I mentioned. Indeed, to ensure that the general election in Quebec ran smoothly, the Chief Electoral Officer of Quebec had decided to use his power to correct the situation, since parliamentarians had failed to do so.

As soon as the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr. Mayrand, revealed that he had no intention of making a decision, the Bloc Québécois, through my hon. colleague from Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, sent him a letter, calling on him to correct the situation and to ensure that, when voting, all voters confirm their identity by uncovering their entire face.

Furthermore, in the hours that followed, if memory serves, all the parties of this House made the same appeal to the Chief Electoral Officer of Elections Canada. The Prime Minister then intervened, saying that common sense dictated that voters must prove their identity when voting, which is also our position. Identification means more than just presenting documents or ID cards; it also means being able to guarantee that that individual is the same person as the one on the photo ID cards, and for that to be possible, the person's face must be fully visible.

As I recall, the Prime Minister wasted no time stating his position on the matter, and the leader of the Liberal Party took the same position. That is why it surprised me that yesterday, some of our Liberal colleagues did not seem to think there was a problem. It is strange that just after the byelection, they thought there was a problem and that now, for reasons I do not quite understand, they are flip-flopping on the position the Liberal Party leader took at the time.

I also remember that the NDP leader agreed with them initially, and that a few hours later, he started to adjust his stance on the issue. Unfortunately, I have not yet heard the NDP's opinion in this debate.

That being said, I do remember that all four party leaders spoke out in favour of voters showing their faces. At the time, it just so happened that I was giving a press conference to announce the Bloc Québécois' activities leading up to its convention in October 2008. Right then and there, as soon as Mr. Mayrand, the Chief Electoral Officer, stated that he had decided not to intervene, we condemned the situation.

• (1010)

Within hours, the Bloc Québécois whip announced that he would introduce a bill on the subject. That is exactly what he did. We introduced a bill requiring voters to show their faces when voting, a bill that respects gender equality.

When he tabled the bill, the member for Beauport—Limoilou requested the unanimous consent of the House to fast-track it, to move it through all stages quickly, but that did not happen. The Conservative Party, for strictly partisan reasons, refused to give its consent so that it could table the bill now before us.

Obviously, we cannot oppose the bill in principle, because we prompted this decision by the government. We could have moved

much faster if there had been unanimous consent with regard to the bill introduced by my colleague, but that was not the case. Now, we have this bill before us.

As I mentioned, we support the bill in principle. However, the government has not tackled the root of the problem with its bill. Yes, voters will have to uncover their faces in order to be identified and be able to vote. But it is up to the Chief Electoral Officer to decide how this obligation is to be met, even though the Muslim community never made any specific request about this. This is where the real problem lies. The bill is responding to a request that was never made by a specific community that has been identified as the community to which the Chief Electoral Officer's decision was meant to respond.

The problem with the bill that is before us is that it is still up to the Chief Electoral Officer to determine how voters are to meet the requirement to identify themselves. We would not want Muslim women to ask to uncover their faces only in front of other women, because gender equality with regard to election officials would not be respected. In our opinion, religious considerations have no place in public spaces. We are not saying that religions are marginal or unimportant, but government employees have a responsibility to enforce the law fairly and equitably for everyone. In our opinion, there is no basis for this. I repeat that there has never been a request, on religious grounds, that Muslim women, for example—I am using this example because it has been reported most often in the media—be able to ask election officials to be allowed to uncover their faces only in front of another woman.

In our view, this is exactly the same as if a police officer wanted to arrest a man and the man invoked his religion and said that he could not get into a car with a female police officer. It is the same kind of thing. And that is the direction in which we will be going.

In committee, we will be proposing that a number of provisions in the act be tightened to ensure that such cases do not arise and that it will not once again be the responsibility of the Chief Electoral Officer to decide the procedures relating to the obligation for people to identify themselves when they vote. We have been sent a signal: it is up to parliamentarians to provide a complete response to the problem raised in the three byelections in Quebec.

We therefore support the bill in principle, but in terms of the manner in which it will be applied, we will want to be sure that religious considerations will not conflict with the fundamental principle, the obligation that electors have to identify themselves properly when they vote. We will therefore also be wanting to raise the question of postal ballots.

Government Orders

●(1015)

We will quite properly be raising the fact that while an elector has to identify himself or herself by showing his or her face in an election, there will be no such obligation for postal ballots. We will therefore want to amend the Elections Act accordingly in this regard. We will see whether this is acceptable during debate, but logically, it seems to me that we will have to move in that direction.

For example, it is mandatory to uncover one's face and have one's face uncovered when passport photographs are taken. In the area of airport security, the authorities are entitled to ensure that people are properly identified, by way of the passports or ID cards that are requested. Logically, for a right as important in a democracy as the right to vote, out of fairness to all electors, we have to ensure that the same methods are applied, including that everyone have an obligation, for the process of identification, to vote with his or her face uncovered.

That is the position that the Bloc Québécois will be taking. Once again, I would repeat, on the substantive issues, we support the bill. In our view, it is crucial that we ensure that all electors are equal before the law. As I said earlier, it is those principles that we will be arguing for in committee.

To conclude, I reiterate that the Bloc Québécois supports the bill in principle. All electors must be equal before the law. The Bloc Québécois and the other political parties believe that the Elections Act, as amended in 2007, was sufficiently clear. However, because the Chief Electoral Officer has refused to use his exceptional power to require that everyone who votes do so with their face uncovered, the Bloc Québécois believes that it is necessary to amend the act as quickly as possible.

As well, the Bloc Québécois notes that the bill presented by the government is not a complete response in terms of the principles of the equality of all persons before the law. As I said, the bill in fact opens the door to violations of the principle of the equality of men and women.

The first five clauses of Bill C-6 were introduced in order to allow deputy returning officers and poll clerks to delegate their power to another individual. This is what I was talking about earlier, and felt was the weak point in this bill. Using that mechanism, a male deputy returning officer could accommodate a female elector by designating a woman before whom the elector could uncover her face to confirm her identity. In our view, that violates the principle of equality between men and women and of equality among all electors.

The Bloc Québécois will support Bill C-6 at second reading but will require that the first five amendments be changed, as I stated, to ensure that everyone has the same obligations with respect to the law.

I mentioned that the Bloc Québécois acted quickly in this matter. We wish to closely monitor this issue particularly since we are aware that it is at the heart of a debate that is extremely important to Quebec—the place of religion in public space.

That is not all. As I mentioned, we believe that by virtue of the principles of equity and equality, and out of respect for the values of Quebecers, which are shared by Canadians, Bill C-6 must be

amended to ensure that it fulfills its purpose. The government wanted to address the issue raised by the Chief Electoral Officer; however, its solution is inadequate and is not in keeping with the expectations of the Bloc Québécois and of Quebec society as a whole.

In the hours following the decision by the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, the parties in the National Assembly were united. Premier Jean Charest, the leader of the ADQ, Mario Dumont, and the new leader of the Parti Québécois believed that common sense dictated that individuals should vote with their face uncovered to ensure proper identification and also, as I mentioned, for security reasons, as is the norm. Therefore I find it difficult to see how, in the case of such an important right as the right to vote, these rights would be violated.

●(1020)

As I was saying, the Bloc Québécois will support Bill C-6 at second reading.

Hon. John Godfrey (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a few questions for the hon. member. He spoke of the need to correct the situation, but I want to know what situation he is talking about. What is the problem he is trying to resolve?

I would like him to tell us exactly how many incidents there were during the general election in Quebec in the spring and during the three byelections in Quebec in September. How many times did the legislation fail in terms of elector identification? How many people, whose faces were covered, ran into problems when they cast their vote?

Where is the sense in asking someone to uncover their face when it is not necessary and is even impossible to have a universal photo ID card across Canada? It does not exist. We cannot ask citizens to get a driver's licence just to vote. There is no mandatory photo ID for the entire voting population. What happened to common sense? What is the link between a photo ID card and the need to uncover one's face?

The hon. member spoke of principles, but what principles? Does he mean the principle of nonsense? There is no link between uncovering one's face and the need to produce photo ID, since such universal cards do not exist in this country.

Quite frankly, what is the situation he is trying to correct? Let him elaborate on specific incidents and tell us what principles and common sense he has in mind.

●(1025)

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Mr. Speaker, I would like to emphasize that the point here is equality among voters and equality between men and women. There was only one incident: four women voted with their faces veiled, which they justified using the Chief Electoral Officer's directives. It is clear that this was an isolated incident. We should be grateful for the voters' sense of responsibility and wisdom in the three ridings that held byelections. If not for that, this issue could have been blown way out of proportion.

Government Orders

This is not about specific issues; it is a matter of principle. If we offered a group of voters the opportunity to vote with their faces covered—except for medical reasons, obviously, as set out in Bill C-6—we would be violating the principle of gender equality. Moreover, if we are talking about a specific religion, the Muslim community never asked for this.

I would like to quote part of an interview with Mrs. Ibnouzahir on Radio-Canada:

These women have been voting for years. They have never asked for special treatment, even though they know they have the right to do so under current legislation. They themselves took the initiative to show their faces, just as they do at customs or at the passport office, because they believed it made sense for security reasons.

They do not think it is unreasonable to show their faces when they vote. Why create an exception that goes against the values of Quebec society and, I think, Canadian society, to act on a request that was never articulated by any group in Quebec or Canada?

The Bloc Québécois wants to engage in a real debate between a vision of society known as multiculturalism, which seeks to bring all cultures and ethnicities into society, and Quebec's intercultural approach, which seeks to integrate all members of a society into a common culture.

I think that it is essentially the Trudeau legacy that is making the federal Liberals go back on the approach developed by their leader when these incidents happened. If I remember correctly, I think that the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada felt that common sense and the need to respect the right to equality between female and male electors dictated that it was necessary to vote with the face uncovered. Now, it seems as though some comments were made within the caucus or the core electorate of the Liberals that led the party to change its approach, reverting to the approach of Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Society is made up of individuals and groups that join together rather than stand apart. So we will not wait for the incidents to happen. We are happy there have not been more.

A parliamentarian is responsible for addressing concerns as they arise, and not waiting for there to be a problem. It was the Chief Electoral Officer who asked parliamentarians to fix and clarify the situation. This is why we want to go further than Bill C-6 to ensure that the Chief Electoral Officer has all the necessary parameters to enforce the law as it should be, and as the parliamentarians in this House thought it would be. I think that the Liberals should start to seriously reflect on this. Perhaps this explains their problems in Quebec. They are completely disconnected from the way Quebecers think.

• (1030)

[English]

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to the response given by the hon. member. He talked about responsibility and wisdom. I saw no wisdom in his response. I found it a veiled attempt at discrimination.

The bottom line is that currently as the law stands there are people who can mail in ballots and who can do special ballots. They do not have to show their faces. There are 80,000 to a million people who vote that way. Where is the wisdom in trying to target one community?

I am very proud of Mr. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the prime minister who brought in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It protected everyone and did not discriminate because I did not look like them. I would like to see where the wisdom is in the discriminatory practices of this member.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Mr. Speaker, our party sees the fundamental principle as the equality of men and women. It is a basic principle in public life. As I mentioned before, a man who does not wish to be arrested by a female officer is denying this right. Religion is of no consequence in a public space. The police officer, whether male or female, has the same responsibilities, the same obligations and the same rights under the law. The same principle is true for elections. In addition, I repeat, this has never been an issue for the Muslim community. We had testimony in this regard from several witnesses, including members of the Muslim Canadian Congress.

In my opinion, the answer to the member's remark and question is very clear. Here we see the legacy of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, a view of society that is outdated in several respects. In fact, citizenship issues have been clarified over the years. In this regard, Bill C-6, although incomplete, uses a much more modern approach to the integration of newcomers than that of multiculturalism, which has led to problems not only in Canada and Quebec, but also in Great Britain.

It may be time to wake up and realize not only that public spaces must respect rights and values in a manner that is equitable for all individuals but also that public spaces are secular spaces.

[English]

Hon. John Godfrey (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am so glad the member for the Bloc explained his principles, his good sense, his logic and his understanding of the problem. The problem is that there is no problem. He just told us that in the Quebec general election a grand total of four people showed up wearing veils and they were dealt with under the existing law. Where is the problem?

He says that we are going to correct the situation. What situation? There is no situation.

The problem is that we are being asked to pass a law that is entirely unnecessary. It makes no sense. It was not a problem during the Ontario general election, which has exactly the same rules. It was not a problem during the Quebec general election nor during the Quebec byelections. We do not have a problem.

We have a method of dealing with it. We ask for pieces of identification, which do not need to be photo ID. We ask, in case of doubt, that people take an oath that they are who they are and they will suffer the penalties if they are not who they are supposed to be. We are not here to pass unnecessary legislation where there is no problem.

Government Orders

Worse than that, we are not here to pass coded legislation, legislation that singles out only one group. People often use the phrase “the veiled voting bill” as opposed to the visual identification bill or whatever other Orwellian phrase we are currently using.

It is singling out a specific group of people, Muslim women, who are not part of a problem, who have not asked for this and who are now being asked to say that even though they did not ask for it, they will go along because they want to go along. Why should any group of innocent people in Canadian society who are being singled out for a non-problem be asked to swallow themselves whole simply to get along? What we want is for everyone to participate in society as full members, certainly for newcomers, including Muslim women, veiled or unveiled.

Meanwhile, there are real problems. One real problem is being addressed by Bill C-18, which is leaving a million people off the voters lists. That strikes me as a bit of a problem and yet we are investing all of this energy in a non-problem that has the sideswiping effect for a group of innocent women in this country.

This is a totally ridiculous bill and it is, of course, completely illogical. People can vote by a postal vote and there is no problem at all. People can vote stark naked. They can vote with a blanket over their heads. They can vote under water blowing bubbles as long as they do not get water on the paper. They can do all of that and there is no connection with visual identification. We cannot insist that every Canadian needs to have photo ID because there is no photo ID that all Canadians are required to have.

By the way, Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Don Valley East, who has much to say on this point.

Hon. John McKay: Is this a veiled threat?

Hon. John Godfrey: This is not a veiled threat. This is a real opportunity because I am a sharing kind of guy.

Since we cannot insist that all Canadian citizens have a driver's licence or any other standard visual identification, there is no connection between showing one's face and the forms of ID that are available to people. People may as well be told to show their left foot or their belly button. None of them make any sense. We are not here to promulgate laws that are unnecessary nor are we here to deal with illogicality and a lack of principle.

Finally, if we want to get into the general oddity of this bill, there is what I call the English patient clause. For those who saw the film *The English Patient*, they will remember the guy lying in his little villa covered with bandages. Apparently, we are worried about him. There are four references to *The English Patient* in the bill. One is “bandaged people”. Bandaged people will not be treated like anybody else. There will be discrimination between people who are bandaged and those who are not.

The bandaged people will need to produce a piece of ID saying that they really need the bandage. One has a sort of strange image of people getting off their deathbeds, crawling out from their Italian villas, like in *The English Patient*, and casting their vote. However, it does not treat all voters the same, so why do we have *The English Patient* exception and yet we go on about this other non-problem?

● (1035)

All in all, this is a silly bill. It is silly and dangerous because it promulgates a false idea that there is somehow a problem and that problem is somehow associated with Muslim women, the very people we are trying to get to be citizens, along with everyone else in this country.

We should not be passing the bill. It is unnecessary, silly and illogical.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rather enjoyed my hon. colleague's silly diatribe, or entertaining diatribe I should say. He talked about blowing bubbles. Frankly, I think he was blowing smoke because all parties in the House agreed that something needed to be done quickly. This government has shown leadership by tabling this bill.

We would love to move on to Bill C-18, which is a significant problem that the government has already dealt with expeditiously. We would ask for the opposition's help in doing this. Let us get Bill C-6 behind us. All four parties agreed that this needs to be done, so why are they stalling? Why are they not showing leadership on this issue? They talk about leadership. Let us show some leadership in the House together with the government and get it behind us so we can move on. We need to quit stalling and get on with it.

Hon. John Godfrey: Mr. Speaker, part of our duty as parliamentarians is to reflect on things, to take in additional information and to ask ourselves, with a little time, whether this makes any sense, and that is what we are doing. We are looking at it. We have the bill before us and now that we have looked at it we see that it is not logical. No problem is being solved by this and it has this dark side of discrimination about it, which is why we are opposed to it.

● (1040)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Mr. Speaker, like my Conservative colleague, I heard some things that made my hair stand on end. I got to know the Liberal member when I sat on a committee with him, and I had a great deal of respect for him. But now I am asking myself serious questions about his behaviour and what could possibly be behind his comments.

When we can identify someone, then we must do so. People have the right to vote, and no one must ever take on another person's identity. I am wondering about this because of the history of the party the member represents. I nearly lost the election in 1998 because some voters impersonated other people. Does the member see this as a way of increasing the Liberal Party's share of the vote in the next election?

Hon. John Godfrey: Mr. Speaker, three things are behind my comments. First, as Paul Valéry said, “Stupidity is not my strong suit”. When I see a silly bill, I have to speak out against it.

Second, I do not like the myth that there is a problem caused by Muslim women.

Government Orders

Third, I represent my constituents, and my riding has the highest proportion of Muslims in Canada. I can say that there is no problem during byelections, provincial elections or federal elections in my riding. I know this community well, and I am here to defend them against myths.

[*English*]

Hon. Gary Lunn (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I cannot help myself but to weigh in. Here are the simple facts. At the procedure and House affairs committee, all four parties said that we needed to do something, including the hon. member's party. They said that we needed to bring a bill forward. They asked for it in the committee.

All of a sudden the Liberals have changed their mind. I am not sure if it is because they know the other three parties are all in favour and now they have an opportunity to stand up and vote instead of sitting down and abstaining.

I am not sure where they are standing but the record will show that in the procedure and House affairs they asked the government for this legislation and said that they would support it. It was unanimously passed at committee and now they are not sure where they stand. It is consistent with what we have seen from the Liberals in the last few weeks. They are not sure when they should vote and what they should vote for.

I guess it is not surprising that we are now seeing that they are somehow opposed to this when they were calling for it at committee and the government has given them the exact bill they asked for.

Hon. John Godfrey: First of all, Mr. Speaker, we did not ask for this bill, with its illogicality. Second, what we said in the procedure and House affairs committee was that we should consider the matter. That is what we are doing. We are considering it.

Having considered it, we will reject it, because we actually take on board new information. That is our job as parliamentarians. We have thought about it, reflected and consulted, and now we realize this is not the way to go.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise on this important issue of democratic freedom in our country.

As my esteemed colleague from Don Valley West has said, this is a flawed bill. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects the rights of an individual to freely practise his or her religion without interference from the state. Regretfully, the Conservatives are proposing legislation that not only will divide Canadians, but also targets a religious minority for no other reason but to pander to the politics of fear and ignorance.

The Conservatives are showing their disdain for rights and freedoms, and Bill C-6, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act, is a flawed piece of legislation. It represents a knee-jerk reaction that would require Muslim women to unveil their niqab or burka for the purpose of visual identification at the ballot box.

Canadians could be forgiven for thinking veiled Muslim women pose an urgent threat to the integrity of our electoral system, and therefore it appears that the Prime Minister has made it one of his priorities to force voters to show their faces at the polls. But is there

any shred of evidence that such a problem existed in the first place? The Conservative government has admitted there was no apparent case of fraud in three federal byelections that were held in September in Quebec when unjustified hysteria over veiled Muslim women first boiled over.

So what is it that the Conservatives are trying to fix? If a problem does not exist, what are they trying to fix? I think what they are trying to fix is that "if you do not look like me or act like me, then you are a problem". I think that is really unfair to a large population of over a million people who have been law-abiding citizens, who have voted and who have never faced discrimination of the nature that they are seeing at the moment.

The legislation was not crafted in response to any incident involving fraud. Rather, it is irrational and hysterical. If a problem did exist, why did the Prime Minister not include these provisions in the electoral bill that was passed by the House less than six months ago?

The Conservatives have tried to dress up this bill as a means to enhancing public confidence in the democratic process. But it has nothing to do with electoral integrity and everything to do with pandering to the narrow-minded fears about minorities, particularly in Quebec, where this troubling debate over reasonable accommodation is now raging.

What if there is a requirement for visual identification? At the moment visual identification is not required by law in a federal election. In fact, Canadians have the option in this country to vote by postal ballot, where no identification is required, yet the Conservative government firmly believes that veiled Muslim women are a threat. I challenge any member of the House to document one single incident of electoral fraud in Canada that was committed by a veiled Muslim woman.

As Canada's Chief Electoral Officer has pointed out, over 80,000 Canadians voted in the last federal election through the postal system and none of them were required to provide photo identification. Why? Because the law does not require it. These people are snowbirds and other Canadians who are out of the country during a federal election. Should we therefore disenfranchise 80,000 Canadians based on irrational fear?

It may interest members to know that Muslim women currently serving in the Canadian Forces are permitted to wear a hijab on duty. Is the government therefore trying to say to Muslim women that it is okay to serve on the front lines of the Canadian military, but it is not okay for them to wear a veil when they vote?

• (1045)

The Canadian Forces wants to recruit more Muslim women because we desperately need them. We are in Afghanistan, and really, the Conservatives have no idea of what they are doing there. They do not even know what pluralism or diversity means, so what is the message the Conservatives are trying to convey? Is the government trying to uphold the rights of only certain citizens and succumbing to fear and sudden whims that pose no threats? As parliamentarians, we are elected to represent our constituency, and I feel obligated to resist policies that are made on irrational impulses.

Government Orders

We are elected to look at and consider legislation. If it is based on reasoning and rational thought, then we approve it. On this occasion, the bill as it currently reads unfairly targets a religious minority. Also, not only is it contrary to my beliefs, but more important, it is contrary to the law as it currently exists.

I would strongly urge the government to reconsider this legislation and reflect on its responsibility to uphold democratic rights in the country. Considering how flawed the bill is and considering that it is targeting only one community, it is important that it be tightened up, the flaws reviewed and the bill not passed, because it will never pass the charter challenge.

It is another example of the Conservatives' agenda of divisiveness and discrimination against one group. There are glaring inconsistencies and this is shamefully playing cheap politics at the expense of Canadian Muslims. It will not achieve anything. It will not achieve its stated goal of improving visual identification except in wanting one group to lift its veil. Really, it is a veiled attempt at discrimination against one group.

● (1050)

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am not even sure I should make a comment because I would not want to imply any impartiality. I am the chairman of the committee that studied the bill and I am absolutely appalled at the member's comments. The member is making this into a race issue.

On that committee, we heard from a number of representatives from the Muslim community, and every single one of those who represented numerous communities across this country were absolutely ashamed of this becoming a race issue. The revealing of faces is not a religious issue; it is a custom. They were appalled at any insinuation that this had anything to do with race.

To have the member stand in this House and suggest that anyone else's comments besides her own are dividing this nation is absolutely rejected. It is shameful. The Muslim community wants this legislation. This legislation was debated. Witnesses were heard. The members opposite were completely in favour of this legislation at the time.

I wish I had counted the words in that speech in order to mention the number of times the member is wrong and how she should be ashamed of making this into a race issue. It is not a race issue. I wish she would apologize to the Muslim communities in this country.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to respond to the member. This shows the arrogance of the Conservatives. They think they represent the Muslim community. They think they have talked to the Muslim community. They have no clue.

I, as a Muslim woman, take pride in whatever garb I wear. I do not wear the hijab or the niqab. That is not the issue. The issue is that the government has decided to make the veil an issue. It has decided to target a community. It has decided to discriminate against one million Muslims.

The Conservatives should apologize. They should be ashamed of this. There was no issue. Why did they make it an issue? The current law does not require visual identification. There is no photo identification required. People could use a debit card or a bank statement. What sort of nonsense are the Conservatives spouting? It

shows they have no idea when they bring in bills. They bring in haphazard legislation and expect people to pass legislation that is so haphazard, so ludicrous and so stupid.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest to the comments of my colleague across the way. I have a question for her: where does the Liberal Party stand?

She has been quite articulate in her positions, but the Liberal Party was very clear at committee, or at least the leader was very clear, that the Liberals wanted this. They asked for this. As we have heard, there was unanimous support for this at committee. However, we have heard from the members for Don Valley East and Don Valley West about their positions.

Therefore, I have a question for the member. Is this her position on the matter or is it her leader's position? If it is her leader's position, then I have a follow-up question: why has he changed his position on this? We have seen consistent flip-flops on this. Is this a stalling tactic? Canadians want this matter dealt with. Not very long ago, the committee was unanimous in asking that this be dealt with, and so the government is providing good legislation.

Is the member's position changing? Or is her leader's position changing? I hope she can answer those questions.

● (1055)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Speaker, the Liberal Party is the party of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Liberal Party believes in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and it will uphold the Charter of Rights and Freedoms whether one is a veiled woman or not a veiled woman or whether one is white, purple, pink or black, because that is what the charter states. We do not distinguish. We do not discriminate against gays or sexual orientation, et cetera.

Therefore, by singling out veiled women, the government has seized an opportunity to look at visible signs of differences, so next it will go after beards, turbans or whatever. That is what it will do. The rights of every citizen have to be protected. As Canadian citizens in this pluralistic society, a society where immigrants are one in five, we need to behave like Canadians, but we do not have to be a monolith.

In light of this and in the absence of any security concerns, I do not know why this is such a prejudicial bill.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is with great pleasure that I participate today in this debate on Bill C-6, which here and now, in this House, renews the debate on veiled voting.

In these early hours of this debate here in the House of Commons, the whole issue surrounding this bill is a very emotional one. I see that my colleague who spoke this morning and gave a speech filled with emotion is now leaving the House. I can see this is a very emotional issue.

Government Orders

I want to begin by saying that I have a great deal of difficulty, after hearing the first comments by the Liberals, in understanding the Liberal Party's position today in this House. As recently as September 7 of this year, the Liberal Party of Canada was calling for amendments to the act. It called on the Chief Electoral Officer to take action and to reverse the decision he made concerning voting in the byelections that were to take place on September 17 in Quebec. Indeed, it is hard to understand today's statements by the Liberals on this matter, when we heard the leader of the Liberal Party stating the opposite on September 7.

However, the debate here is not new. We must remember that it is part of the debate that has been taking place in Quebec in the context of two recent votes. I think first of the byelection that confirmed the election of Pauline Marois. As it happens, while the issue of veiled women voting was not at the heart of the campaign it certainly was raised during that byelection.

We must also recall that this debate was also raised during the September 17 byelections in Quebec. As a matter of fact, the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada announced that women wearing veils could vote in the next federal election and in the Quebec byelections on September 17 without being required to uncover their faces. The following day, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party—I emphasize that—and the Bloc Québécois intervened, calling on the Chief Electoral Officer to reverse that decision. Later, naturally after some pussyfooting and hesitation, the leader of the NDP thought better of it and also demanded that the Chief Electoral Officer's opinion be reviewed.

The result is that we are now considering Bill C-6 which seeks to amend the Canada Elections Act to require male and female voters to have uncovered faces when voting or registering to vote.

Of course, the bill before us today includes some exceptions, one of which involves allowing voters to keep their faces covered for health reasons, but only on the condition, of course, that two pieces of identification be presented.

Furthermore, under Bill C-6, certain exceptions would determine under what circumstances—and these are the cases for which the law provides flexibility—a voter must uncover his or her face.

I would remind the House that this kind of debate has already been raised this year, when we amended the Canada Elections Act in order to be able to confirm the identity of voters. As I recall, we thought that the problems raised in the context of the two byelections—especially the one on September 17—had been resolved by that amendment. However, Bill C-31, which we examined clause-by-clause in February 2007, made it mandatory for voters to produce photo identification in order to vote.

• (1100)

Thus, it seemed sufficiently clear that voters were obliged to prove their identity. Fundamentally, that is the spirit of this bill. It is not a racial question, as some members have said here today. Rather, it is a question of verifying the identity of voters. At the time, we thought that amending the Canada Elections Act through Bill C-31 was enough to clarify the situation regarding voter identification.

I would remind the House, however, that the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada refused to use his special authority to require all

voters to uncover their faces in order to vote. The Bloc Québécois would like to see that legislation amended as quickly as possible. This is why my hon. colleague from Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord introduced Bill C-465, to amend the Canada Elections Act: in order to ensure that voters vote with their faces uncovered.

I would remind the House that this accommodation, which would allow certain voters to keep their face covered while voting, is not the sort of reasonable accommodation called for by the Muslim community.

I remember that, during an interview on Radio-Canada on September 10, 2007, Ms. Asmaa Ibnouzahir said that Muslim women had decided themselves to take the initiative and unveil their faces because they thought it was a normal thing to do so as a security matter, just as they do at the customs or the passport office. The Muslim community itself, therefore, as represented by *Présence musulmane Montréal*—an organization that is quite representative of the community—said that these women had been voting for years and had never asked for special treatment, although they knew they had the right to do so.

There is no demand or request for this kind of accommodation, which would mean that women would not need to uncover their face. That is why we need to act as quickly as possible. Is Bill C-6 perfect? No, it is not, but it has the advantage of dealing with the situation in principle, in view of the fact that the Chief Electoral Officer refuses to use his powers under the Elections Act.

What are the imperfections in Bill C-6? We think that it does not abide by the principle of equality between men and women. Under the first five clauses in Bill C-6, deputy returning officers and poll clerks can delegate their powers to another person. Under this provision, a male deputy returning officer could therefore accommodate a female elector by designating a woman before whom the elector could uncover her face to confirm her identity. This is totally unacceptable.

It is as if citizens of Arab or Muslim origin came into my riding office but refused to be served by my assistant because she is a woman. I would tell these people that my assistant is perfectly competent and is there to serve the citizens. There is no possible doubt in this case that the equality of men and women is a basic right. I fail to see why this principle of the basic equality of men and women cannot be upheld in the bill.

Government Orders

•(1105)

I will finish by saying this is clearly an emotional debate. It is a debate that we need, though, because of our responsibility for democracy. We need to find the right balance in our ability to accommodate people. It is important to be able to identify people when they exercise their voting rights. Of course there can be some exceptions for medical reasons, but in general, we should ensure that when a citizen comes to a polling station, he or she must address the deputy returning officers or poll clerks who are there, regardless of whether they are men or women, and identify himself or herself, in accordance with the legislation that we are trying to amend today.

[*English*]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the member's remarks. I understand that he was on the procedure and House affairs committee, or had listened to the witnesses. If I understood him correctly, there is no issue with the Muslim women; this is not what it is about. I would like him to reiterate that and tell me then why the Liberals would try to make it into such an issue, if they had agreed at committee that it was not an issue once they heard that the Muslim women themselves are not offended. Could the member assure us that this definitely does not have anything to do with their being Muslim and that it is about voter identification at the polls?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Bigras: Mr. Speaker, like my colleague, I listened to the first speeches by the Liberal Party of Canada this morning and I was a little surprised at what my colleagues in the official opposition were saying, because they were quite simply not on the same page as the leader of the Liberal Party, who asked the Chief Electoral Officer on September 6 to revisit his decision.

It seems to me that we might have expected some minimum of consistency this morning here in the House. I say this very humbly and without wishing to play political games. We can support this bill in principle. As I said, the bill is not perfect. It is certainly subject to being amended in committee. However, on the principle of the bill, we must be in favour, because there is a virtual consensus, apart from the NDP flip-flopping, having changed its mind on its position. It seems to me that we had a degree of consensus among the opposition parties, and that the Liberal Party was in agreement at that point. Now I am finding it difficult to explain the first speeches by the Liberal Party.

•(1110)

Hon. John Godfrey (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a few questions to ask my colleague from Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie.

First, he insists that there is no racial element in this entire matter. And yet the next minute he is talking about this bill concerning voting with one's face covered. That is not the title of the bill, but that is what he is talking about. What is being referred to when he says voting with one's face covered? Is it women who belong to religious orders? I do not think so. It is in fact a group: Muslim women.

I would also ask him to make a logical connection for me between visual identification and the fact that in Canada we cannot

insist that everyone have a piece of photo ID. Given that fact, why insist on people uncovering their faces? If it is not mandatory to have a piece of visual identification with a photograph, why compare that to a face? There is no logical connection, and so that is the question I am asking him.

Second, I would ask that he think a little about the distinction between passports, which people must have in order to cross borders, and the right to vote. It is a choice to get a passport and leave the country, but we have the right to vote as Canadian citizens and there is still no mandatory piece of photo ID.

And to conclude, I would ask him what the problem is, and how many incidents this bill will resolve? Instead of answering, we get told about principles. What are these principles? There is no problem, and so there is no need to have this bill.

Mr. Bernard Bigras: Mr. Speaker, the proof that the hon. member is wrong lies in the fact that this is not an issue of race. If a Canadian citizen, a citizen from Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie for example, wears a veil and decides to go to the polling station, that person must identify themselves regardless of where they are from. We cannot have people going to polling stations wearing veils, whether they are Muslim or not. Showing one's face is the simplest way of identifying one's self.

My colleague is in fact proving that it might be time for us to have elector ID cards. That might be the way to resolve much of this problem. As far as passports and crossing borders are concerned, I did not give that example; *Présence Musulmane Montréal* did during an interview on September 10. Let me say again to the hon. member: Muslims have never asked for special treatment even though they know they have the right to do so. They have taken the initiative to uncover their faces because they thought it was perfectly normal to do so as a matter of security. They do so at the border and at the passport office. It was not a member of Parliament who said that; it was *Présence Musulmane Montréal*.

Mr. Luc Harvey (Louis-Hébert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are hearing comments on the subject of veiled voting. Some people are even trying to give it a racial slant. During the last election, I was in Saint-Hyacinthe, where several people were wearing veils and others were wearing grocery bags on their head. It was absolutely despicable because people were abusing the situation and even sharing bags. I think this goes against the purpose of one person one vote. I have also done my research and there is not a single country in the world that allows women to vote with their faces covered, except for this one maybe.

Since we are talking about double-checking a person's identity by comparing their face to their identification card, I would like to know what the Liberal Party stands to gain by maintaining voter anonymity. The question is for my friend from the Bloc.

•(1115)

Mr. Bernard Bigras: Mr. Speaker, I partially answered that question earlier. It is very dangerous, on the basis of Bill C-6, to say that this is a strictly racial issue. The Liberals are playing a dangerous game this morning.

Government Orders

The member's example was the same as one I mentioned before. A voter who arrives more or less disguised at the polling station must identify themselves, as must any Muslim woman who wears a veil. It is purely a matter of identifying the voter. My colleague is right; there are even precedents in Morocco where some accommodations can be made. However, when a citizen appears before a deputy returning officer, he or she must be able to identify the voter. This is the purpose of the act, a principle which the Liberal Party should support this morning.

[*English*]

Ms. Colleen Beaumier (Brampton West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I find it quite amazing that everyone in the House pretends to be an expert on Islam. Of course the Muslim member for Don Valley East would know very little about it.

As Christians, we can stand here and say that we are going to heaven and they are going to hell because the man who teaches us interprets the Bible better than their preacher does.

We talk about Islam being a custom and not a religious requirement. I have heard the kirpan referred to in the past as a custom, not a religious requirement. This was settled in court and the court ruled that it was a religious requirement.

The member said that he spoke to a number of Muslims. Was it 50, 100, 500? That does not make him an expert on Islam. It does not make him an expert on whether this is a custom or a religious requirement.

He said that the members of the Muslim community asked for this. I am sure they did not ask for it because this non-issue has become a major issue. Is that not true? Did they come before or after we made this an issue?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Bigras: Mr. Speaker, the answer is clear. The issue came up well before we debated it here. If my colleague had followed the Quebec elections—both the provincial election and the byelections held in September—she would have known that our examination of the bill today is based on facts.

We must make sure that this does not become a racial debate. It is because some citizens appeared—and I stress that it was not just Muslim citizens, but simply citizens—with their face covered to vote in the byelections.

[*English*]

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Brampton West.

As we debate various legislative proposals in the House, we are most often dealing with what we would describe as the “what” question. What is the bill designed to do? What does it change? What does it replace in terms of current law? However, I must confess, like many of my colleagues in the House, that I am asking the “why” question when it comes to the Conservative government's Bill C-6. Why has the government brought forward this legislation and why at this time?

First, one could ask whether there is a pressing and widespread problem with respect to the integrity of the voting process in regard to women who choose, for religious reasons, to wear a veil. Quite

frankly, this is simply not the case. If it were not for the fact that some politicians have raised this issue, I am not sure it would have materialized as a major concern for Canadians, their elected representatives or observers in the political arena in our country.

I read with interest a quotation from the head of the Islamic Association of Nova Scotia, who said of this issue:

There was no controversy. The Muslim community never complained. The women would gladly take off their veil for a woman official.

I will not dwell too much upon the possible reasons for the government to bring forward Bill C-6, but let us consider the normal motivation for legislative initiatives.

The primary and appropriate motivation is based upon a sound and pressing policy requirement. In other words, the introduction of a piece of law is based upon sound public policy and the greater good of our society.

The second and less acceptable motivation is for political purposes. In view of the fact that this issue is not of concern to Elections Canada and was not clearly in need of urgent remedial action, I can only leave members of the House to draw their own conclusions in regard to what has motivated the government to introduce Bill C-6.

I believe a number of my colleagues have already raised the issue of mail-in ballots in regard to Bill C-6. While the government seems preoccupied with respect to the issue of veiled women having to remove their veils in voting stations, it seems to be perfectly comfortable with the concept of mail-in ballots.

In the 2006 federal election there were approximately 80,000 mail-in ballots. Obviously it is, by very definition and practice, not possible to visually confirm the identification of a voter using a mail-in ballot.

Furthermore, Bill C-6 and current election law do not even require the presentation of photographic identification for the purpose of casting a ballot in a federal general election.

In practical terms then, Bill C-6 could create a scenario where veiled voters are required to unveil themselves after having presented several pieces of non-photographic identification. What possible benefit is derived from this unless the polling official personally knows the voter? The practical realities of Bill C-6 are simply absurd.

We should also take note of the fact that in nations like the United Kingdom there has been talk of addressing voter turnout issues by permitting voting over the Internet. Clearly, the future will likely include the use of such tools to facilitate easier voting by citizens in Canada. When and if this comes to Canada, it will only further relegate to insignificance legislation like Bill C-6.

The real motivation of the government is clear to many observers. The *Global and Mail* editorial page recently expressed the thoughts of many reasonable observers when it stated in regard to Bill C-6 the following:

Pandering to...prejudice is a cheap way to win votes. Prime Minister Stephen Harper is pandering by introducing a bill to force veiled Muslim women to show their faces at polls.

Government Orders

•(1120)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I remind the hon. member for Davenport that we do not use colleagues' proper names but riding names or titles.

Mr. Mario Silva: Mr. Speaker, I am actually quoting.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): You cannot do indirectly what you cannot do directly in the House, so please refrain from using the proper name.

Mr. Mario Silva: Mr. Speaker, the truth is that this is just the latest manifestation of the government's politics of division and discord. We have only to look to the termination of the court challenges program or the government's opposition to the equal treatment of gays and lesbians as examples of its approach to governing.

The reality is this is a non-issue that the government has whipped up into tempest for its own narrow and limited political objectives. If the government wanted to address real issues facing our country in terms of elections, it could look to ways of addressing very serious concerns like ever shrinking voter turnout at election time.

In federal elections we are averaging only 66% voter turnout. At the provincial and municipal levels of government it is even worse, where turnout levels are in the 50% and 25% ranges, respectively.

Clearly, there is need to reform our electoral system to encourage more Canadians to vote, not to find or create situations that discourage voting. Simply put, Bill C-6 is another example of the government's pattern of targeting specific groups of Canadians. It is just not appropriate or fair.

Instead of simply aiming laws like Bill C-6 at one particular group in our country, we should be embarking upon a thorough and comprehensive review of our electoral system. We need to look at broad based issues. This could include the issue of photographic identification. Is it something we should require? Is it practical?

The reality is that current law, as noted before, does not require photographic identification. This is something we can look at in the context of a comprehensive review of voting regulations. Similarly, there are other means of voting that we need to look at in order to encourage Canadians to vote.

We have an aging population that finds it increasingly more difficult to vote. As the number of older Canadians grow, there are real challenges to their ability to exercise their right to vote at polling stations. This is especially true during winter campaigns.

Although there are some processes available to allow people in these situations to vote, they are cumbersome and act in reality as a deterrent to voting. Likewise, many Canadians travel during winter months and in winter elections may not have the opportunity to exercise their right to vote at polling stations. Again, while there are mail-in ballots, we should look at the process to determine how it might be made easier for overseas Canadians to vote.

Another major and ever increasing issue is that of apathy found among young Canadians in exercising their right to vote. These Canadians are the future of our country. What can we do to encourage them to vote?

We need to address issues like these because they are issues of substance. They speak to the heart of the issues facing our electoral system. Instead of playing political games with issues like those found in connection with Bill C-6, we should be looking to address these real and pressing concerns.

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a compelling document. However, it is not only a document; it is the spirit of our country. It is the expression of the values we hold dear to our hearts as citizens of our great country. It is also something the government finds an inconvenience.

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms speaks to our equality and the right to the free expression of our religious beliefs. Bill C-6, in essence, is looking upon the issue as some kind of cultural matter. The use of the veil is not cultural. It is an expression for Muslim women of their religious beliefs.

In view of the fact that the current election law does not require photographic identification, in view of the fact that mail-in ballots are permitted by the election law, in view of the fact that this issue has not been raised by the Muslim community that it directly affects and in view of the fact that voters can simply vote using a utility bill or a bank statement, why is the government raising this issue?

It is really my original question once again. Why? The government needs to answer this question truthfully.

It was the great philosopher Aristotle who said, "Democracy arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects". This statement is something we should all consider today in the House as we debate the government's proposed law.

•(1125)

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to suggest, if the member is so confused about why we are doing it, that this is the time to do it before an election so that the people at the polls have to use some discretionary measures to give a ballot.

I believe it was the chief electoral officer who insisted that this be done and it is about the integrity of democracy and of the vote. Therefore, I do not understand why the member would not want to see this go through and be settled.

The Liberals are making this into a cultural or religious issue but it has nothing to do with that. It is asking for visual identification to get a ballot. That is all it is. It was not an issue until the Liberals made it an issue.

However, I am trying to think of all the things that come up on an election night. Perhaps, as the member from the Bloc tried to stress, these kinds of things become an issue on election night when these people do not have a great deal of time to seek out some sort of guidance on this.

If the member is trying to make a religious issue out of this, then perhaps he should go back to the people who he is saying are affected. They have already said to the committee that they are not affected by this legislation and that they would be glad to take off their veils. They are not unhappy about it.

Government Orders

All parties at the procedure and House affairs committee agreed to have this legislation for the integrity of the voting system. Therefore, why not just pass the bill. It does not sound like it will hurt anyone or cause any problems throughout the Muslim communities. This has nothing to do with just religion or culture. It has more to do with showing ID at the polls.

• (1130)

Mr. Mario Silva: Mr. Speaker, I have spoken both in the House and in the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs about the importance of reviewing our electoral laws and, specifically, how people vote and what the requirements are when people do cast a ballot. It is quite important for the integrity of the system that there be proper identification when people are casting a ballot. I have argued, in fact, for photo identification.

The problem is that the government, in its haste, has brought a series of laws into the House without carefully looking at all the ramifications. A case in point was the law it put into place that looked at voter identification and missed out a piece of it, and several other pieces were also missing that are very important.

I have raised in my debate the fact that one can show a phone bill, which has no photo ID, and cast a ballot. My deepest fear and concern about this specific legislation is that it appears more and more to be targeting one group and omitting all the other issues that are equally important to the whole process of voting in this country.

Therefore, if the government wants to table legislation that reviews the whole system of how we vote, how to get more voter participation and how to bring in a photo ID card system for every Canadian who casts a ballot, I am willing to look at that and study that.

However, no. What the government has decided to do is target, and it is really targeting, one specific group. It cannot deny the fact that it is targeting one group, and that is what I find most offensive about this law.

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in listening to this debate, we know this issue has gone before committee and we know it unanimously passed the committee. We are trying to shore up a small hole.

What the other side is trying to do is make it into a wedge issue. It knows very well that this has nothing to do with discrimination. This has nothing to do with singling out a particular minority. This has only to do with the chief electoral officer's concern being addressed. The opposition is now trying to slow down this legislation. It is a ruse. It is a red herring. The opposition is trying to paint a particular political party, a group of people with a smear. It is sort of like a reverse smear.

Why does the opposition not just get on with it? Why does it not come right out and say it? No, it does not do that. It uses innuendo. Let us get on with this. The Canadian people expect us to.

Mr. Mario Silva: Mr. Speaker, the member was factually incorrect when he said that the chief electoral officer called for this. He did not call for this at all. The only party that is calling for this is that member's party, the government, which is insisting this has to be.

I am saying that a series of issues need to be addressed so why only focus on one issue? The government is focusing on one issue because of the fact it wants to create a wedge issue in this country. It wants to create an issue of intolerance and fear, which is why I am offended by the legislation.

If the legislation were comprehensive and if it dealt with several other issues facing our country, I would be fine with it, but it does not. The government is focusing—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Brampton West.

• (1135)

Ms. Colleen Beaumier (Brampton West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, contrary to what I normally like to do in this House, I really do not want to be confrontational. However, I would like to explain to the House my concerns about this legislation.

The hon. parliamentary secretary said that it will not hurt anyone. She may be right but I am concerned that we are on a slippery slope here. We do one little thing, which the member says is not targeting, but I believe it is targeting. Catholics and Hindus do not wear burkas.

I am not sure the legislation intentionally targets anyone. However, since 9/11, the Muslim community has been extremely patient. They have been targeted at borders and targeted by police.

Fourteen members of a food security company, which was doing testing for the government, needed RCMP clearance. They were all immigrants. It took about four months longer to process the security clearance for the only Muslim in the group, Dr. Eshaq Shishani. To me the reason was fairly obvious. It was because he was a Muslim. He was stopped by the police one night. They opened the trunk of his car and found some documents on food radiation. Food radiation is a scientific process being done in the lab. Since the documents concerned radiation, the police officers handcuffed Dr. Shishani, strip-searched him and threw him in jail. He was allowed to wander home the next day with no apology being given. Can anyone tell me that is not targeting?

I am just concerned that we continue to go on thoughtlessly without really considering how these people are feeling.

We have heard so much debate on burkas. Other women have said that Muslim women should not wear burkas because it is the subjugation women. I thought being an independent woman was about having a choice, a choice to be a cookie baker, a choice to be a member of Parliament or a choice to wear a burka without condemnation and criticism. It is not a matter of saying who is right and who is wrong. We do too much of that.

Religious school funding was an issue during the last provincial election campaign. Who was targeted in Ontario? Who did the newspapers show as wanting this religious school funding? It was the Muslim schools. It was non-white schools. It was the Sikhs. News reports would do a little clip on religious rights or on Jewish schools but the target was fear and it was using the Muslim community and its schools as a weapon.

Mr. Brian Pallister: And the Liberals used it against John Tory in the provincial campaign.

Ms. Colleen Beaumier: The news did that.

Government Orders

I know that oftentimes we do things because we think we are going to curry favour with ethnic groups. I do not believe that Christmas trees should be taken down at Christmastime. When I send a Christmas card, it should say Merry Christmas. As a matter of fact, a Muslim imam once said to me that I was the only politician who sends him a Christmas card that says Merry Christmas. I asked him if he was offended by that and he said no. He said that if people cannot respect their own religion and customs, how could he expect them to respect his. I have learned much from the Muslim community.

We have now learned that “jihad” is a dirty word. It is a word that means terror, death and vengeance. However, it is not. Jihad is a holy war within oneself and yet we continue to misuse this word, which is a very precious word to Muslims, and we use it in such a negative way.

I know the Muslims have been targeted. I do not really see what the big deal is about four women in Quebec wearing burkas. If I can go in and not have proof that I am a Canadian citizen and I can take an oath, why can they not take an oath to say who they are?

I may be wrong but, and this is from my heart and soul, I believe this. I have watched many of these people stand with dignity while they were being put down and I am afraid this is just another example of that.

• (1140)

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I actually believe the member does feel that this is a targeted measure. However, as a whole, she and her party are going places that are really unnecessary. This is really about the integrity of democracy. If people are allowed to vote with covered faces, then how do we ensure the integrity of the identifying of voters. This is only about identifying voters.

Those are really good stories about going through airports and being targeted but that is another issue in another debate. This is just about fixing a little glitch in the Elections Act. It has nothing to do with targeting voters or whatever. If we were going there, then we would have a lot of bigger issues. It certainly has nothing to do with that and I am sorry that is what it is being made into.

I cannot imagine people listening to this today and even listening about the religious schools funding and the way the media, as she says, handled it. That issue is with the media and I would quickly take her debate out there and talk to the media. It has done a disservice.

I think she has good intent and really believes what she said but she needs to look at the big picture. This is about voting from coast to coast across Canada. It is about showing identification. We need to fix it. The chief electoral office must have had a reason for asking that it be fixed. It cannot just be put on hold. We need to do it now before it becomes an issue, before voters decide to show up in any sort of disguise at the voters' booths. Those things are not easy to deal with on election night, as I tried to express. What we are trying to do is avoid all these problems.

We just went through an election in Saskatchewan, so we know what it can be like. My daughter had to find two pieces of ID when

she was a university student. She had to find a place to vote. It was not easy. She needed the ID.

I think what we are trying to do is prevent a lot of problems on election night and we do not want to make it into a cultural issue or a targeted group issue.

Ms. Colleen Beaumier: Mr. Speaker, I did say that the religious school funding was a media report. I had no intention of debating that in the House.

I sincerely do not believe that anyone believes they are targeting another group. However, when we talk about the integrity of voter identity, are we going to stop proxy voting? We all know that proxy voting does not have a great deal of voter identity involved with it. Are we going to stop mail-in votes?

This applies to so few people. With the problems we have on voting day with the lists with duplicate names at same addresses, this presents more of a likelihood of fraud, and fraud in large numbers, than something like a burka or having a bandaged face.

Mr. Brian Pallister (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade and to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am a little concerned with the member's comments in the sense that in linking legitimate concerns about preserving the integrity of a voting system for the country with the allegation of targeting, which essentially was the focus of the member's rant today, I am afraid the member is doing a disservice to other members of the House, as well as to those who expressed legitimate concerns about the issue of burkas in voting booths, including her own leader who expressed support for the concept of addressing this issue to the Canadian people.

I would like the member to assure this House that she is not attempting to impugn the intentions of her own leader today in her remarks.

• (1145)

Ms. Colleen Beaumier: Mr. Speaker, that was a really silly question.

I do not think that I have accused anyone in this House of deliberately targeting anyone else. I made that very clear from the outset of my speech. I have not singled out any Conservative member. I have not singled out any Bloc member. I have not singled out any member. I am simply expressing the way I feel. I am not even saying I am right and others are wrong, which is highly unusual in this House.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Mr. Speaker, since this morning, I have felt a light breeze of hysteria blowing on this side of the House. Accordingly, I have decided that I should speak on this bill.

As politicians who have to face the electorate, we always state that the right to vote is not only a right, but should also be an obligation. So it works both ways. From that statement it follows that we must be able to establish the identity of the people who come to vote and to express their democratic choice.

Government Orders

I have heard many comments. They all came back to the fact that one could—at least, that is how it appeared to me—attack some segment of the population. In other words, the comments were discriminatory in some respect, which should not be the case. To exercise the right to vote, one must at least be capable of satisfactorily proving one's identity.

It would, perhaps, be interesting to look at the chronology of the events concerning voting with the face covered. We have gone through a similar situation in Quebec. Let us start at the beginning.

On March 22, 2007 the chief electoral officer of Quebec confirmed that women wearing veils could vote in the provincial election on March 26, even if they refused to uncover their face. Radio program hosts launched a campaign to persuade voters to go and vote with their face covered as a protest against the decision of the chief electoral officer.

On March 23, confronted with a public outcry and the possibility of seeing the election turn into a masked ball, the chief electoral officer of Quebec changed the electoral act: all voters would have to have their face uncovered.

On June 19, the members of the House of Commons adopted Bill C-31 to amend the Canada Elections Act. The bill provides for a photo identification procedure.

On September 6, the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada announced that women wearing veils could vote in the next federal election and in the September 17 byelections in Quebec without being required to uncover their face.

On September 7, the Liberal party, the Conservative party and the Bloc Québécois called on the Chief Electoral Officer to reverse his decision. The Muslim community of Montreal also expressed its disagreement with the new policy. The following day, of course, the New Democratic party reconsidered and demanded that the position of the Chief Electoral Officer be reviewed.

On September 10, at a news conference, Marc Mayrand, the Chief Electoral Officer, stated that he had no intention of using his exceptional power to reverse the situation before the September 17 byelections. On that date, at least four women voted in the byelection in Outremont wearing a burka, to show their disagreement with the Chief Electoral Officer. One man, in a wheelchair, voted wearing a balaclava.

On October 17, in his Speech from the Throne, the Conservative government gave notice of its intention to introduce a bill prohibiting electors from voting with their face covered. On October 23, as we had already announced, the Bloc Québécois introduced a bill to prohibit people from voting with their face veiled. On October 26, the Conservative government came up with a bill to prohibit anyone from voting in an election with his or her face covered.

Of course, the Bloc Québécois supports this bill in principle. However, we feel that there are certain provisions which, while not absurd, will have to be reviewed and probably amended. We are finding that the bill introduced by the government does not fully reflect the principle that all are equal before the law.

Indeed, the bill opens the door to violations of the principle of equality between men and women. The first five clauses of Bill C-6

were included to allow deputy returning officers and poll clerks to delegate their powers to another individual. This means that a male deputy returning officer could accommodate a female voter by designating a woman in front of whom she could uncover her face to confirm her identity.

● (1150)

The Bloc Québécois feels that this is unacceptable. We will, of course, support the bill at second reading, but we will demand that the first five clauses be repealed.

The bill also includes some exceptions. For example, a person who must keep his or her face covered for medical reasons could still vote by providing two authorized pieces of identification and by taking an oath. Bill C-6 also adds new provisions to the act that allow returning officers to appoint additional persons in polling stations, and to also delegate some of their responsibilities.

As I mentioned earlier, I heard some very strange comments, primarily from Liberal members, who said that this is a witch hunt, that we do not have the right to prohibit people from voting with their face covered, and that we were directly targeting a community. In fact, our position is based on the very principle of democracy, on the right to vote, and on the need to make it practically impossible to use someone else's identity.

Not so long ago, it would have been unthinkable for any voter to show up with their face veiled or otherwise covered, preventing their identification. Now, in a specific context where there is much discussion everywhere about reasonable accommodations, a common knee jerk reaction in some people is to often use certain pretexts to find fault with those who wear a veil or cover their faces otherwise. In Roberval, a veiled woman showed up and voted. We are not necessarily talking about a burka here.

This goes to show how the door can be opened for individuals who are probably looking to make a mockery of the whole situation and to demonstrate that it is possible to vote without proper identification.

I was quite surprised by the Liberals' reaction, especially given what the leader of the Liberal Party had said. The *Canadian Press* quoted him on September 9 as saying, "We disagree with Elections Canada decision and we ask them to revisit their decision. At the end of the day, you must be able to identify yourself when you vote".

It was the Liberal leader who said that. Later, he stated that, on the one hand, he disagreed with Elections Canada's decision not to reconsider the issue of uncovered faces but that, on the other hand, he might be able to live with the provisions of the existing legislation. This means that, at one time, all political leaders in this House were singing the same tune, saying that identification was necessary to vote.

Several principles guide the Bloc Québécois' position on this issue. As I said earlier, the Bloc Québécois supports the bill. All voters should be equal before the law. I also indicated that, in 2007, the lawmaker amended the Elections Act to tighten the requirements with respect to voter identification. Among other things, Bill C-31, which was passed by the House of Commons in February 2007, no longer allowed people to vouch for more than one elector and required photo ID to be able to vote.

Government Orders

•(1155)

The Bloc Québécois and the other political parties believed that the Elections Act was clear enough and that by requiring voters to prove their identity, it was implicitly requiring them to uncover their faces.

However, because the Chief Electoral Officer refused to use his exceptional power to require that all voters uncover their faces, the Bloc Québécois believes that the act needs to be amended as soon as possible, as we are doing. That is why we introduced our own bill.

We must not forget that groups representing Muslim women assert that they have never asked to be accommodated in this regard. In an interview with Radio-Canada, Asmaa Ibnouzahir of Présence musulmane Montréal said:

These women have been voting for years, and they have never asked for special treatment, even though they know they could. They themselves took the initiative to show their faces, just as they do at customs or the passport office, because they believed it made sense for security reasons. So for them, it is perfectly natural to uncover their faces.

I believe that this quote is enough to put an end to the debate about the requirement to uncover one's face when voting. I therefore ask the Liberal Party to reconsider its position and face facts: in the interests of democracy, people must vote with their faces uncovered.

[*English*]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I commend the member for those words. He has brought the debate to where it should be, which is to talk about the integrity of the voting process.

I am as confused as he is about the official opposition. I am wondering if those in Quebec understand it a little more because they can see how easily it can get out of hand. He gave some examples of why. He understands that perhaps if this kind of thing is allowed, it sometimes causes more problems with racial remarks or remarks against groups that really do not deserve it.

I was pleased that the member called upon the Liberals to rethink this so that we could get this legislation through quickly and then solve the real problem on the next issue, which was a clear oversight and has to be resolved.

Could the member tell us why he thinks the party next to him is so against this when in fact it is the proper and right thing to do?

•(1200)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cardin: Mr. Speaker, I thank the Conservative member for her question.

In asking that question, she is opening a door, because it takes me back several elections. Although no one has ever really wanted to admit it, it was a time when people had become experts at identity theft in an attempt to win additional votes.

When people can vote with their faces covered and their identity cannot be proven, obviously all sorts of things can happen. In a democracy, these sorts of things must be avoided as much as possible. Every effort must be made to prevent people who do not

qualify to vote from voting. These people might have been able to cover their faces in order to vote for someone else.

This is the principle that is driving me. At no time have I thought of religious considerations. I am thinking only of democratic considerations. Voters must uncover their faces, and election officials must be able to correctly identify voters, who are not only exercising their right to vote, but also doing their duty as responsible individuals and, in so doing, are participating appropriately in the political process, with their faces uncovered.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Accordingly, the bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

(Motion agreed to, bill read the second time and referred to a committee)

* * *

[*English*]

CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (for the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform) moved that Bill C-18, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (verification of residence), 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, it is a pleasure for me to stand today to speak to Bill C-18, verification of residence. It is important for me to put things in context as to how this bill came about and why we are debating it here today.

It all started in the last session with Bill C-31, the integrity of voters, in which we debated at committee and in this place on the plans for the government to introduce legislation that would require voters to produce identification before voting at a polling station in their riding. This was something that was unique. Prior to the bill being passed there were no requirements for visual identification or identification of other sorts prior to voting.

We wanted to make sure that we took appropriate steps to ensure that there would be no voter fraud at any election in the future because we had heard many times from many sources information suggesting that there had been perhaps isolated incidents, but incidents nonetheless, of individuals fraudulently casting ballots in federal elections.

Government Orders

In fact, at committee we heard several examples of how this could occur. Very simply it could occur because someone who wished to impersonate or fraudulently vote in an election could pick up a voter identification card. These are the cards that are sent out to Canadians by Canada Post with their name and address indicating that they are to vote at a certain polling station or certain location in their riding.

Here is an example what would happen in some cases. These voter cards would be sent to apartments and many apartment residents might see it in their post office box, pick it up and just discard it in the garbage bin located in the foyer or their mail box location within their apartment complex. Some individuals then could literally go and take one of these voter cards, walk to the appropriate station on voting day, identify themselves as the person whose name appeared on the voting card, get a ballot and vote. Of course, that is fraud and we want to prevent that.

We had other identified cases in committee where one voter might get three or four voting cards. How would that happen? Simply someone may be named "John Doe" and at another address such as a business location might be named "Johnathan Doe", or maybe "J.D. Doe". So there are cases in which the same individual might be listed multiple times and that individual, should he or she wish to do so, would have the ability to go to different polling stations within his or her riding with these various voting cards and say "I am this person", and then vote multiple times.

We wanted to take steps to ensure the integrity of the voting system and that was the genesis behind Bill C-31. When the legislation was drafted, it contained two provisions in terms of identification. One was that in order to be eligible to receive a ballot and cast a ballot, an individual would have to either show one government issued photo identified piece of identification such as a driver's licence or provide two pieces of identification that Elections Canada had prescribed, one of which would have the residential address on it and both of which would have the voter's name on it. Those two then would suffice and the individual would be able to receive a ballot.

Also, I want to inform all members of the House and all Canadians who may be watching that if people did not have proper identification, they still had the ability to get a ballot and cast a ballot by way of vouching. This quite simply was if someone came to a polling station and said "I live here, I am a resident of this riding, I want to vote and I would like a ballot", but they did not have proper identification in one of the two prescribed forms that I just identified, they could get someone to vouch for them.

• (1205)

In other words, someone who was eligible to vote, who had proper identification and who lived in the same polling division would be able to say to the returning officer, "Yes, I know this person. This is the person who is who he says he is and he lives in this riding". In that fashion that individual, without identification, would be able to cast a ballot.

We thought that this was an appropriate piece of legislation. It would sort of cover off all of the bases. It would ensure that there was integrity in the voting system, but at the same time it would place some requirements on voters to actually produce identification ensuring that the integrity within the voting system was paramount.

We debated this. We brought in witnesses. All committee members examined this bill very rigorously. We had officials from Elections Canada come in. We eventually passed this through committee I believe on June 20, 2007. It was later given rapid royal assent, which is unusual with some pieces of legislation in the Senate. I believe it received royal assent on June 22, 2007.

The reason we wanted to get this bill passed as quickly as we could, even though we gave it due diligence and we wanted to make it as expeditious as possible, is because as everyone knows in a minority government situation an election could occur at any time. Also, there were several byelections that were pending. We wanted to ensure that this bill was passed into law before any election took place, whether it be a general election or a byelection.

Recently, in the fall of 2007 there were three byelections in Quebec and this bill was in effect. People were required to produce identification. After the election of the three new members of Parliament, Elections Canada then took a look at how this identification requirement worked and whether it was sufficient.

Lo and behold, Elections Canada found a glitch in the system because the bill contained the phrase "residential address". In other words, proper identification required someone to produce ID that gave the name and residential address of the voter.

There are many Canadians, approximately a million across Canada, who reside primarily in rural ridings or rural portions of a riding at least, who do not have a "residential address". They have addresses that are contained in the form of a post office box number or a rural route number or even perhaps a land description. Technically, the way Bill C-31 was worded, those people would be ineligible to vote. Although they had an address, it was not considered to be a residential address.

As soon as the government discovered that we wanted to take rapid action to correct it. Once again we could be on the cusp of a general election. Once again there are several byelections pending. We wanted to ensure that there was no disenfranchised voter in Canada because of this glitch in the legislation that we had passed.

Therefore, we started a very rapid consultation process. I know I personally met with my democratic reform critics from the other parties with a suggested wording and a suggested change to correct this glitch in Bill C-31. We also consulted with Elections Canada.

Basically, what we came up with was a very simple but yet very effective fix to the problem at hand. It is quite simply that anyone who can produce identification at a polling station, name and identification of course, and whose address on their identification was the same as the address on the voters list, regardless of whether it was a residential address or a non-residential address, then that individual would be eligible to vote.

Government Orders

In other words, and I will use myself as an example because I would have been or I am currently I suppose, because this legislation has not yet passed this House, I am one of those disenfranchised voters. I live in a small community in Saskatchewan called Regina Beach. We all have civic addresses. I live at 308 Sunset Drive, yet no one has at home mail delivery. We have post office boxes. So on my identification it says P.O. Box 458, Regina Beach, Saskatchewan. Every single resident of Regina Beach has the same non-residential address, a P.O. box of some fashion and some number.

● (1210)

Under the terms of Bill C-31, since I do not have a residential address I would not be allowed to vote. However, by introducing Bill C-18, which we are speaking on today, the address I have on my identification is the same that appears on the voters list. Therefore, I would be able to get a ballot and vote. It is a very simple and effective fix. We feel this is something that, if all members in this assembly agree, could be passed quickly and I think we should.

Some have argued that it still does not deal with the entire problem and there still may be the odd person here or there who is disenfranchised or potentially could be disenfranchised. For example, if he or she moves into a community and does not have proper identification because the election was held within days of moving to a new location, the individual does not have a new driver's licence or any other identification that shows his or her new residential or non-residential address.

However, we still have the ability, as in Bill C-31, to vouch for individuals. If people are able to provide another person who is an eligible voter to vouch for them, they would be able to cast a ballot. I would suggest that in rural Canada this probably would be easier to do than it would be in urban Canada.

Let me explain. In urban Canada or larger cities, people come and go as houses are sold and new residents move in. It has been my experience that a lot of people in the larger cities do not know their neighbours well. Some do, but in many cases they are very insulated. They have a cocoon-like mentality. They go home at night, lock their doors and do not really notice what is happening around them.

Therefore, if voters in urban Canada or in a larger city have just moved into a new neighbourhood and do not have proper identification showing their new residential addresses, they may find it somewhat difficult to have someone vouch for them because their neighbours may not know who they are. That is usually not the case in rural Canada.

I can use my own small town as an example. If someone new moves into our community, it seems that within hours everyone in the community knows it. They know who the person is, where he or she came from, how many children there are and what the person does for a living.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: What their favourite dessert is.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: And what their favourite dessert is, that is right. That happens in rural Saskatchewan. It happens in rural Canada.

So the argument that this bill still does not quite capture all of the potential problems or glitches I think is something that has been captured by this vouching system.

Will there ever be a system where absolutely, without question, 100% of individuals who live in this country and are eligible to vote will be able to cast a ballot unimpeded? I do not think so, but I think the chances are very remote that a lot of people will be in that situation. I think that Bill C-31 and this new Bill C-18 will have captured the vast majority of people who are eligible to vote and who wish to vote.

Therefore, I would strongly urge all of my colleagues to stand in this place and give this bill speedy passage. I know that none of us in this assembly want to disenfranchise anyone who lives in rural Canada because of something that was an error, something that was missed in the first piece of legislation, Bill C-31.

To speak of that for just a moment, Canadians watching this debate may ask how this could have happened. How could this bill contain such an obvious error and omission and still get passed into law? I think that is a shared responsibility, quite frankly. It was simply something that was missed. When we were first discussing Bill C-31, the procedure and House affairs committee gave its unanimous consent to bring the bill forward to be presented as a piece of legislation and we just simply missed this.

● (1215)

We also had officials from Elections Canada come before the committee on two occasions to examine Bill C-31. They missed it. No one picked up on the fact that the term "residential address" might cause some problems for Canadians who had a non-residential address. Bill C-31 went through the whole legislative system, passed this place, passed through the Senate, was granted royal assent and became law. It was only after the fact that we found out there was a gap in the legislation. That is why we are taking swift action to rectify this.

I would certainly hope that individuals in this place would recognize that and pass this bill speedily and get it to the Senate, where I hope the other place treats it in a similar fashion and gives it speedy passage so that we can get royal assent for Bill C-18 prior to any impending election.

One last point I should probably touch upon deals with the non-government issued photo ID requirements that I spoke of earlier. If hon. members recall, Bill C-31 contained two provisions for identification. One is to produce a government-issued photo ID stating a person's name and address, such as a driver's licence. Also, if people do not have photo ID, they can give two other pieces of identification, both of which must have their name on it, but only one of which needs to have an address on it. Those pieces of identification come from a list approved by Elections Canada.

Some would ask what kind of identification would be approved by Elections Canada. There are many pieces of identification that would suffice: student ID cards, hospital cards, library cards or even a government-issued cheque stub with a person's name and address on it. Those are the types of things that would be eligible.

Government Orders

Also, because I know the NDP has questions about this and has problems with the fact that we are even asking Canadians to produce identification, what about people in homeless shelters? The NDP says that homeless people do not have identification.

However, we have attestation, whereby a manager, for example, or a supervisor at a homeless centre, could attest to the fact that a person is who she says she is and she resides in that homeless shelter which is part of that riding. We have even gone to those lengths to ensure that, not only for the homeless but for senior citizens who may reside in seniors' centres and who can be attested for by the supervisors or managers of those seniors centres if they do not have proper identification.

I think we have done as much as we possibly could to ensure that there are no individuals disenfranchised, but also to respect the spirit of the original Bill C-31, which is voter integrity to try to prevent voter fraud. The only way, in our estimation and in the estimation of the procedure and House affairs committee, to ensure that voter fraud is eliminated or at least curtailed as much as possible is to have identification presented at the time the individual goes to a polling station.

In other words, I believe Bill C-31 and now Bill C-18 strike the proper balance between the ability of individuals to exercise their franchise and vote in federal elections and, on the other hand, the fact that we want to respect the integrity of the voting procedures and the voting system by ensuring there is no fraud in the voting system.

That, in a nutshell, is the genesis of Bill C-31 and it is why we introduced Bill C-18 to try to correct that gap contained in Bill C-31. Again, I would strongly encourage all of my colleagues in this place to support Bill C-18. I hope we can see its swift passage through this place.

• (1220)

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for bringing forward these much needed improvements.

I had a question from a constituent. I wonder if the member could elaborate on whether the street address of residents had any effect on military voting for people who are not in the riding at the time, on students who are away from the riding at the particular time of voting, or on elderly people who go to the United States for the winter. Does the street address residence item affect them at all? Is it corrected in the amendment?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is asking about someone who is a snowbird and who is, for example, vacationing down in Phoenix, where I suppose half of Saskatchewan goes in the wintertime. If an election is called in the winter, he is asking, would these provisions capture any inequities in the ability of those individuals to vote?

The regular rules and regulations for special ballots remain in effect. In other words, if people are away at the time of a vote, they can still get a ballot. They can have a mail-in ballot or a special ballot of some sort. They will still have to produce some form of identification to get that ballot, but they will not be required to do anything beyond the norm.

Bill C-18 is here to address an inequity, a gap, that we found in Bill C-31, and it is here to ensure that people with non-residential

addresses have the ability to vote at a voting station at the time they show up.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for presenting this bill in an attempt to fix Bill C-31, a bill that the NDP of course voted against when it originally came forward. We raised some very serious concerns at the time about the number of voters who would be disenfranchised, yet all three parties in the House, the Liberals, Conservatives and the Bloc, supported the bill. Now we see the problems emerging.

On June 18, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform said:

What we are trying to do, by presenting a bill that will give increased and expanded voting opportunities for all Canada, is attempt to raise the level of voter turnout.

Yet what we saw with Bill C-31 was that it in fact disenfranchised at least one million people in rural Canada. We also raised as an issue people who are transient or live in homeless shelters. I wonder if the member could specifically comment on how homeless people and people living in transient shelters will actually benefit from this attempt to fix a flawed bill.

• (1225)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I should probably correct my hon. colleague, who seems to be confusing two different bills. She quoted my comments in *Hansard*, and correctly, I might add, but they did not deal with Bill C-31. They were about another bill on expanded voting opportunities. That is a bill through which we want to increase the number of days on which voters can cast ballots in advance polls. We are debating that right now in committee, my committee, which I am missing in order to be here to share my comments with members. It is now called Bill C-16, which used to be called Bill C-55, and is on expanded voter opportunities. It really does not have anything to do with Bill C-31.

However, I would point out one other flaw or misinterpretation the member is trying to foist upon members of this place. She said, quite correctly, that in committee the NDP voted against Bill C-31, but it was not because NDP members identified the flaw of the residential address. NDP members voted against it strictly on the basis that they felt the homeless would be disenfranchised.

I will speak to that, but the NDP voted against Bill C-31 not because, as some of the NDP members have tried to suggest, they discovered before the bill was passed that there was this flaw on residential addresses. Nothing of that sort occurred in conversations in the procedure and House affairs committee. Every single member missed this one gap, this one little glitch that eliminated or disenfranchised rural voters who did not have a residential address. I want to correct the record on that.

Specifically on the question of the homeless, I spoke to that in my main address. We have taken great pains to try to make it as fair and as equitable as possible. Yes, many homeless, perhaps the vast majority of homeless, do not have proper identification. However, if they are members of or frequent attendees at a homeless centre, they can get the attestation, whereby the manager can say, "I verify this person's name and the fact that he or she resides in the centre". Secondly, they do have the ability to have someone to vouch for their identity.

Finally, I would say, again as I mentioned in my main address, is there any legislation in this place which will ensure that absolutely, without question, 100% of eligible voters will be able to cast a ballot? Probably not. There probably never will be.

However, we have taken great steps to ensure a balance between the ability to ensure voter integrity and the ability of everyone who possibly can vote to do so.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to commend the House leader for taking immediate steps on this because it affects rural voters in my constituency, but there is probably a fair share of blame and hypocrisy in the House. I know the member just referred to the comments previously made, but the member for Wascana said that this was a glaring mistake and he referred to it as a Conservative government screw-up, a massive screw-up. Yet at the same time, when we look at the voting record on the Canada Elections Act, the Bill C-31 amendment, the member for Wascana rose on both feet and voted in support of it, notwithstanding the error.

Perhaps the member could comment on the fact that my rural residents now, even with a box number, will have the right to vote with this amendment correction. Perhaps the parliamentary secretary could comment on the hypocrisy exhibited by the member for Wascana.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Souris—Moose Mountain for bringing this forward, particularly the hypocritical stance of the member for Wascana, who quite frankly has made several of these comments before. He says one thing, but when we examine the record closely, as my colleague has done, we find out that actually the reverse is true in terms of his voting patterns.

It is quite clear that not only did the member for Wascana vote in favour of Bill C-31, but all Liberal members of the procedure and House affairs committee, during examination, missed the fact that there was this gap. It is a shared responsibility. For anyone, whether it be the member for Wascana or any other member, to say that this was the blame of the Conservative government is absolutely incorrect and hypocritical, since this bill passed this House, with the exception of the New Democratic Party which voted because of the homeless issue, not because of the fact that residential addresses were contained in the bill. We should have addressed that gap.

With respect to my colleague's question about correcting this quickly so that non-residential address voters in his riding can vote, yes, we wanted to deal with this expeditiously.

I should also state that we have the assurance of the Chief Electoral Officer that this bill does correct the gaps contained in Bill

Government Orders

C-31. In the opinion of the Chief Electoral Officer, Bill C-18 fixes that problem, completely corrects it in fact. We will have a letter to that effect to bring to the committee when we start examining Bill C-18.

The Chief Electoral Officer also stated that should there be an election prior to Bill C-18 receiving royal assent, he would be prepared to use his powers of adaptation to ensure that no rural voter was disenfranchised because he or she did not have the correct residential address on his or her identification.

Between the powers of the Chief Electoral Officer and the powers contained within Bill C-18, we should have this problem fixed.

● (1230)

Mr. Brian Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Not so fast, Mr. Speaker. The member suggested that this problem was discovered after Bill C-31 was passed, with almost everyone's consent and hard work, and I appreciate the hon. member's hard work on attempting to rectify it by introducing this bill.

What I understand is that although that bill received royal assent in June 2007, in fact the problems had been detected before then. I am a little confused, because the first notice that I would have had was when my hon. colleague, quite in a genteel fashion, suggested that we have an all party meeting on this in the fall of this year.

To be precise, when did it come to the government's attention? The member is a government member, and it is not even the new government anymore; it is the government now. When precisely did it come to the attention of the government that there was this problem with respect to addresses?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I congratulate my hon. colleague on becoming the new democratic reform critic for the official opposition party. I look forward to working with him on these issues and many more in committee.

I know that the hon. member normally pays rapt attention when I speak in this place, so it is quite unusual that he did not quite get all of my comments in my main address. I did make mention of the fact that it was after the three September byelections held in Quebec that the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer conducted a review to see whether the new provisions contained in Bill C-31 were appropriate. In other words, were the identification requirements proper? Was the list of alternative identifications identified by the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer sufficient?

It was only at that time that the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Monsieur Mayrand, had discovered that there was this gap. It was upon that discovery that we decided to take decisive action.

In fact, I can assure my hon. colleague and my friend that the first time I heard of it personally was in a phone call when I was back in my home riding. They had just received information from the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer that this gap had occurred. They had identified it. Within days I contacted my hon. colleague and the other democratic reform critics from the other opposition parties asking them to get together for a meeting to see if we could come up with the proper wording. Literally within days of that we had introduced the legislation we see before us today.

Government Orders

Mr. Brian Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I almost rose on a question of privilege when my friend referred to me as the new democratic reform critic. I think what he meant was the new critic on democratic reform for my party. It is almost in the way things are said, not what is actually said.

With that in mind, I do want to congratulate the parliamentary secretary. I would have had many questions for him, but I will pose those questions hypothetically to you, Mr. Speaker, and to the public who may be listening.

If this is a housekeeping bill and will cure the problem of a vast number of rural voters being unable to vote now because of a gap in the legislation, and if it is that non-contentious, and if it means so much to enfranchise over a million voters in this country in Liberal, Conservative and other party ridings, then why was it not given higher priority than Bill C-6, which we just debated, which by and large seems to affect an extremely small number of people, which seems to respond to a problem that does not exist?

Why was this legislation not given priority over a number of other bills that have achieved headlines far and wide across the country? Perhaps the answer is in my question itself: because it is better politics to get more press than to do what is right for over a million voters in this country.

Briefly speaking of Bill C-18, it is true that the parliamentary secretary has worked very hard in trying to get all parties together to bridge the gap that exists with respect to so many voters. It is true that discussions were held. It is true that a number of people have been consulted with respect to drafting the bill. But it is equally true that the government has misrepresented the facts which underlie the reason that we are here today.

If everybody had listened intently to the parliamentary secretary and to the Minister for Democratic Reform himself, it would seem that the Conservative Party is riding forth like the knight on the white horse to cure this problem. The truth is they sat on it; they ignored advice that came to their attention, or I guess in a legal standard, should have come to their attention as government earlier on, and I will get to that in a minute.

In announcing that the bill would be introduced, the Minister for Democratic Reform said, "Once again our government is showing real leadership by taking quick, decisive action to strengthen our voting system by addressing the problem of verifying the residence of voters". I agree with everything there except "real leadership" and "taking quick, decisive action". He also said, "The legislative solution introduced today will ensure that legitimate voters will be able to exercise their fundamental democratic right to vote".

I might remind all members of the House and some on the other side of the lack of fanfare or even notice of the fact that we have a Charter of Rights, and that the Charter of Rights is celebrating its 25th anniversary. I, as a relatively young member of Parliament, am a child of the charter. The charter in section 3, and I bet if I had a quiz on the charter, people could not pick the section that guarantees this right, which is the basis upon which this debate should begin and end, the democratic right of citizens, states that every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly and to be qualified for

membership therein. It is a very short section. I actually counted the words. That section has the fewest words in the whole Charter of Rights, but it is so succinct.

I find it kind of interesting when we look at the democratic reform ethos of the Conservative government how it has been interpreted by the courts has largely been with respect to the rights of inmates and judges to vote. Who would have thought that those two groups would be put together in terms of rights?

There have been significant court cases on whether inmates have the right to vote. People convicted of serious crimes are now determined by our courts to have the right to vote. So fundamental is this right, yet it would seem that the government, in its wisdom, by forging ahead with Bill C-6, might in effect be depriving a few unconvicted, uncharged citizens of this country who profess their religious beliefs of the right to vote, but inmates have the right to vote. I find that a curious turn of events given the government's very strong and strident support of an anti-crime agenda. The irony, of course, is quite delicious.

● (1235)

The other irony in the theme of my discussion and how it is not a case where once again the government is showing real leadership on that white horse is that in fact the Senate of Canada, one of those institutions that the government does not seem to really support, did in fact during its deliberations on Bill C-31 raise questions with respect to the qualification of voters, which as I indicated is guaranteed in the Charter of Rights. A group of senators reviewed the legislation, and let us remind ourselves that the other place has a duty to review legislation passed by the Commons.

We heard the parliamentary secretary for democratic reform in this House stand up and say, "Everybody missed it. Everybody in the Commons, all parties, missed it. It is just a big old mistake and a million people might not be able to vote. We are sorry. We put a whole bunch of bills ahead of this one because we care so much about those million voters in rural Canada who cannot vote. We are going to put a whole bunch of other bills ahead of this one and we are going to blame everybody equally."

Not so fast. Let us work backward. On June 27, the bill itself, Bill C-31, received royal assent. Prior to that, in the month of May and before that time, the Senate of Canada was wrapping up its hearings. A number of questions were had of the Chief Electoral Officer at that time. Those questions went to identifying individuals who did not have addresses. The Chief Electoral Officer is another person who seems to be on the government's hit list. If we add it up, there are Muslim women and minority communities, the Senate of Canada, and now the Chief Electoral Officer. These are targets of the new government and its parliamentary secretaries, who wield such great power.

Government Orders

My friend who spoke to this bill today should be very mindful that the Chief Electoral Officer offered solutions himself, which came up as a result of the Senate's verification and review of legislation. He wrote, "In light of comments that I have already received"—as a result of Senate hearings—"I am considering broadening the list"—and he referred to identification—"to include attestation letters that could be signed by a person of authority in homeless shelters and student residences. Such letters would establish the residence of the individual and constitute one of the two pieces of identification required under section 143(2)(b)".

It was also suggested there were problems, generally speaking, in ethnic communities with respect to voter turnout and verification.

He wrote to the questioner:

You had also suggested that Elections Canada should advertise in ethnic media to communicate the requirements for voter identification to the electorate and, in particular, ethnocultural communities. As part of its commitment to communicate clearly with a variety of groups within the electorate, Elections Canada has sought to tailor the information provided to ethnocultural communities.

He went on to describe what Elections Canada in fact had done in the ethnocultural communities and he talked about the attestation letters. The attestation letters prove the point that the Elections Canada officials are doing their job. The attestation letters were an afterthought as a result of the Senate hearings.

What we have is the Chief Electoral Officer, mindful that this is the act under which he is empowered, attempting to accommodate the law as written as a result of a verification and review in the other place. As a result, attestation letters are now, in practice, what prevails for homeless people, people in student dorms and other such facilities.

Would we not think that the question might be that in its thorough review of this legislation the government ought to have addressed the issue of attestation letters and made it, rather than a practice, the law? And would we not think that, and we may get to this when we send this to committee and correct it, in a thorough review, having had the experience of the byelections, the government would make it a priority to fix whatever flaws it had seen in Bill C-31?

● (1240)

In effect, do members not think the minister responsible, who wanted quick and decisive action, and the parliamentary secretary, who lives in a semi-rural riding, might have thought it very important to review what was already on the books in terms of committee work, or does the world for the Conservative government and the officers of democratic reform for the government end when the bill is presented to the Senate?

I suggest, not. I suggest that whatever happens in the Senate in the review of a bill is very much within the purview of the Minister for Democratic Reform. If he were not so busy taking questions for the Prime Minister and other people who are ducking issues, he would probably have time to do that. It also falls within the purview of the parliamentary secretary. He should have reviewed the work done by the Senate.

However, I am not here to defend the Senate on this item. I am here to defend the Chief Electoral Officer, who responded to a Senate inquiry. It is almost as if the democratic reform team over

there did not exist. The real work was being done in the trenches by the Chief Electoral Officer and by serious senators who were involved in the review of the legislation.

In summary, it is very important for us to remember that the bill will, when taken to committee and fixed in a number of ways with the leadership that other members of the committee will offer to the bill, attempt to fix a problem that was actually created when it was decided we all must have forms of identification to vote.

If I could be non-partisan for a minute, we have to realize that we made a change when we decided in Bill C-31 that everybody had to show identification to vote. We owe it to ourselves to understand that in some countries this is the case and in others it is not. Clearly with respect to the over million rural voters, it effectively disenfranchised them. One has to ask the question we asked throughout the Bill C-6 debate. What was the problem before? Was there widespread abuse or fraud, concealment of identity or multiple voting in the rural ridings of Canada? I do not recall complaints made to Elections Canada.

It is like Bill C-6 where we do not have a single complaint to Elections Canada about voter fraud. We have the hums and ha's of the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, who may have been driving by and saw people with pumpkins on their heads and somehow this became a very large issue.

What we have in this case is probably what will be the rub of the discussion. The serious rub of the discussion for members of Parliament is whether we will go to full identification, meaning photo identification. Countries in the democratic reform capacity not as sophisticated and not as developed as us have gone to that way. There are countries in west Africa that require photo identification to vote.

We have photo identification and a comparison against it, as said in legislation, to have a passport, which will allow us to enter other countries and to re-enter Canada. We have photo identification required by law by many provinces to have a driver's licence. We have photo identification requirements in many administrative and quasi-administrative instances in the country where government agencies are involved.

Do we want to take that bold grand leap toward photo identification for voting? It is a question with which we must all come to terms, be mature about and decide whether we want that. However, if we do not go there, if we do not jump in that large ocean, then we have to stay on the shore. There is no half-way on this.

It seems to me that whatever happened at Bill C-31, whatever happened in the Commons during the debate and in the Senate during its purview, with the poor Chief Electoral Officer trying to keep the middle ground, we have a situation where we are half wet. We have a situation where the first means of voting is to show one's picture ID, but the law does not say that the returning officer in charge has to compare one's face to the photo ID. It seems to be assumed that people would do that, but after all we are here to make law.

Government Orders

•(1245)

We are not here to just to recount our personal experiences. We are not here to talk about pumpkins at polling stations. We are not here to talk about multiple votes without proof. We are not here to talk about the anecdotes. This is a serious place where laws are made.

If we are to have a debate, the debate should be that if we say photo ID is one way of proving people's ability to exercise their charter right to vote, then we should also say that the photo ID should be compared to people's faces, which requires people to show their face. The law does not say that. Worse, the law goes on to say that the person only has to produce, as a second means of voting, two pieces of ID which have an address on it. As interpreted, those addresses have to concur with the list of electors. That is yet again a situation where no person's face is required to be shown. We are half wet on this issue. It is incongruous and very difficult for the Chief Electoral Officer to be sure that everyone who votes is voting.

Then we have to ask the question about our history. I would think that this particularly applies to rural Canada. In our history do we have such widespread voter fraud and multiple voting situations that we have to go that far? I would think not. What we have to rely on are the principles of trust, that when a Canadian citizen comes to the voting box, then in our heads, as lawmakers, as government officials and as the delegated responsible persons from Elections Canada, we should think of section 3 of the charter, "Every citizen in Canada has the right to vote". It should be written large in both official languages at every polling station. We should do our utmost as parliamentarians to ensure that has been put into effect.

What has happened here is, in our rush to be half modern and half photogenic, we have said that one has to fit with the other.

On the positive side, the bill will go some way to cure a problem that exists because of our zealous pursuit of attempting to get rural people, our large rural population, to conform perhaps to a metropolitan view of how we identify ourselves. I think it is an identity issue. I think it is an issue that defines us as a nation.

In our country we have had periods in some cases of rapid urbanization and we have had periods of slow urbanization. I submit that in this history of our country, and what better place to do this than in the House, parts of western Canada were rapidly de-ruralized and rural Canada lost a lot of its character in the period which we now know as the dust bowl period.

We know that in periods of economic recession, parts of eastern Canada were denuded of its people. One only has to look at the outport situation in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador to know that people were pulled away from their rural roots.

The process of de-ruralization is occurring much slower in my province and in the rest of the Maritimes, but it is happening. We are becoming, as the last census showed, an urban nation.

What Bill C-31 did was it added insult to injury to rural Canadians by saying, "We are going to apply a city standard to rural Canadians. We are going to apply a metropolitan standard to rural Canadians. You shall be like us".

What the good part of Bill C-18 suggests is that we are apologizing, as parliamentarians from all sides, to rural Canadians.

We are saying that we were a little too hasty, a little too urban in our thought and we apologize. We are saying that rural Canadians have the same rights as we do as guaranteed by section 3 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

Kudos to rural Canada and kudos to Bill C-18. We will fix and add to it, as we will at committee, and it will make good legislation.

•(1250)

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am glad the member finished the way he did. We hear many things in the House which are specious, disingenuous and condescending. Both being new members in the House, I congratulate my colleague on being such a fast learner.

The member talked about the charter of rights, which everyone upholds. The government also has an obligation, including opposition parties, to ensure that those rights are not abused, which does not suggest for a second that any rural voter has abused those rights. I come from a riding where there was evidence of significant voter fraud during the last two elections. It is important that we uphold the rights of the charter. It is also important for us to ensure that those rights are not abused.

I thank the hon. member for his support for Bill C-6, an important issue which needed to be cleared up by all parties because all parties wanted it.

My colleague, the parliamentary secretary, did point out that all parties cooperated on recovering from an error that was made as an honest mistake by members of all parties. Therefore, there is a lot of blame to share. There is also a lot of credit to share, and the parliamentary secretary did attempt to share that credit with all members of the House.

The member spoke for 20 minutes and the last minute was terrific. The first 19 minutes qualified as those characteristics of parliamentary debate which do not sound good in this place.

Is he going to support this, yes or no? It is important and we all want it. Let us not hold it up. Let us just get on with it, support it and correct what has been done.

•(1255)

Mr. Brian Murphy: Mr. Speaker, I almost rose on a second point of order on the comment that I might have been covering up something. It is not something we do. I am not the new democratic reform for parole, but we support the bill. It will be sent to committee.

Some of the real life situations that have been learned will be melded into the bill. My friend is doing a spectacular job as parliamentary secretary, no doubt because he had good experience in Chatham, New Brunswick. I can see that New Brunswick influence in his work daily. However, I urge him to take his parliamentary secretary job very seriously and realize there is a process in this House, which is bicameral for the moment.

Government Orders

There are an awful lot of committee reports and verification questions through committees that take place in other places. Many officials at Elections Canada have been involved in this issue. As parliamentarians, we all need to realize that our work does not stop when a bill leaves the House. It really only begins because we have to see that our laws are working out there.

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we all agree that we want to raise the level of voter turnout. One practice would raise the voter turnout, and that is door to door enumeration. We used to do that for many years. When the Liberal Party was in government, it got rid of door to door enumeration. Now tenants, students, young people who just turned age 18 and new immigrants who have just become citizens are no longer on the list. They have not been enumerated. Because they are not on the list, often they scramble to try to get to the polling station if they even know where their polling station is.

The key element that would help to increase the voter turnout is not in this bill, not in Bill C-18 and not in Bill C-31.

I remember a few months ago, in the spring, the Liberal Party said that there was all kinds of voter fraud and they suggested we ask Elections Canada to examine a few ridings in Toronto, for example. Therefore, a lot of money and time was spent to check whether there was fraud. Elections Canada said that there was no massive voter fraud. There was no fraud at all. A few people had made mistakes.

If we all agree there is no voter fraud, then why did the different parties pass Bill C-31? We said that it would not fix anything and it created other problems. Now we have another bill. I have no confidence it will fix all the problems or that voter turnout rate will go up. I know people will be disenfranchised because of the problems that are still inherent in this whole debate, which is the lack of door to door enumeration in the first place.

I cannot see how, after a lot of time, energy and money spent on these papers to study this bill and that bill causing embarrassment, the bill will fix these problems. It will fix the problem for those people from rural Canada who have been left off the list, but I guarantee we will encounter other problems.

I hope we return to door to door enumeration so people who need to be on the list will be on it and they can then have a chance to vote.

• (1300)

Mr. Brian Murphy: Is it not typical, Mr. Speaker, that the urban MP representing the New Democratic Party would talk for some time about this specific bill, which attempts to rectify one million primarily rural voters getting back on the lists. Is it not typical that in that one and a half minute non-question there was no mention once of rural Canada? Is that not the problem in this instance that the bill is attempting to address?

Is it not typical that the NDP would bring up all kinds of problems and have no solutions? Is it not typical that its legislative agenda has very little in it with respect to democratic reform? Finally, is it not typical that the NDP, which in effect is responsible for a Conservative government, would somehow attempt to blame the Liberals for not having a solution to the problem that she, some two years later, is suggesting is an urgent problem?

If democratic reform and the identification of voters was a huge problem for the NDP, it should have found its panacea in the Conservative government. It did not. It should have an aggressive democratic reform agenda. It does not. As far as I am concerned, NDP members may be in their places a long time, far away from you, Mr. Speaker, in the House.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Pauline Picard (Drummond, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to take part in this debate on Bill C-18, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (verification of residence). First of all, I would like to say that the Bloc Québécois supports the principle of the bill.

In February 2007, the House of Commons adopted Bill C-31. This bill amended the Canada Elections Act primarily to reduce the possibility of fraud or error by strengthening requirements pertaining to the identification of voters. The Chief Electoral Officer had already expressed concerns about possible problems caused by the requirement to provide proof of identity and residence.

On December 7, 2006, when he appeared before the committee studying Bill C-31, he gave parliamentarians the following warning.

The requirement to prove residence presents a significant challenge. It is worth noting that in Quebec, which is the only province requiring ID at the polls, electors only need to prove their identity, not their residence.

As well, the chief electoral officers of other Canadian jurisdictions have pointed out that in many rural and northern areas of the country, especially west of Ontario, the address on the driver's licence is not the residential address but the postal address.

He got it right. According to Elections Canada, 1 012 989 electors, or 4.4% of qualified electors, do not have residential addresses meeting the requirements of the Elections Act as amended by Bill C-31.

In preparing this speech, I wondered how many voters in my riding might be affected. We inquired with the office of the Chief Electoral Officer. So far, all we were able to obtain was an acknowledgement of receipt, conforming that my inquiry had been referred to the appropriate branch. That takes some doing. Having been made aware of a problem, Elections Canada is unable to tell an elected member of the House of Commons how many voters in her riding might be affected.

But if an election were held today, nearly one million voters across Canada, including 15,000 in Quebec, would be prevented from casting a ballot.

These are the tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of voters in the various provinces who do not meet the new requirements of the Elections Act. A journalist from *La Presse* also tried unsuccessfully to obtain an explanation from Elections Canada.

Government Orders

At various stages of the electoral process, electors are expected to provide undeniable proof of identity, particularly at the time of casting a ballot. Identification systems may also be used for registering voters or granting staff members access to their place of work or to a computer system. Some countries rely on the honesty of voters and do not require them to provide any documents as proof of identity. Other countries do require proof of identity, hence the need for personal identification systems.

In some countries, the use of ID cards is widespread, while in others, ID cards are not intended for everyday use. The public's response will determine whether or not this is an appropriate practice.

For electoral purposes, voters may produce ID cards when registering or at the polling station. Such cards may also be useful to give election officials access to their place of work or to other restricted access areas such as polling and ballot counting stations. They may also be used by the personnel responsible for voter registration or verification of voters lists.

Most ID cards used when voting do have the advantage of helping reduce opportunities for fraud. The ones that include a photo, a signature or a fingerprint ensure an even tighter control, but they must be used with caution, while taking into consideration the country's cultural context. Some security printing processes, such as holograms or coloured illustrations that are hard to copy, also reduce the risk of false ID cards, as do identification procedures that rely on biological information.

• (1305)

In its present form, the Canada Elections Act requires all electors to prove their identity and their residence before being allowed to vote. The new requirements on voter identification are based on a unanimous recommendation made by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

In order to prove his or her identity, an elector must: provide a government issued identity card with his or her photo, name and address—a Quebec driver's licence, for example; or provide two pieces of identification authorized by the Chief Electoral Officer, with both pieces showing his or her name, and one piece showing his or her residence; or ask another elector, whose name appears on the list of electors for the same polling division, to vouch for him or her, after having provided the above-mentioned pieces of identification.

The concern expressed by the Chief Electoral Officer, which we share, is that some electors may not be able to provide pieces of identification to prove their residence, as required by the law, because they live in an area where there are no municipal addresses, or in a region where such an address is not usually indicated on the driver's licence or other identification documents. This concern is the topic of the current debate, and we must find a solution.

The legislation needs to be corrected to ensure that a million citizens are not deprived of the right to vote. Bill C-18 will allow electors in regions where pieces of identification do not contain a civic address, just a post office box, general delivery or a rural route, to use identification with an address other than a street address to verify their residence on condition that it is consistent with the information on file in the National Register of Electors.

The same rule will apply to people who vouch for another elector. If the address on the voucher's identification is consistent with the information in the list of electors, it will be deemed sufficient proof of residence. I would like to look a bit more closely at this bill.

It would allow electors to present identification with an address other than a civic address to verify their residence on condition that it is consistent with the information on file in the National Register of Electors. This is meant to cover people who live on rural routes, for example. The bill also authorizes an election officer, a candidate or a candidate's representative to require the elector or the voucher to take an oath in order to prove his or her place of residence.

In these cases, the residence of the elector or voucher will not be deemed proven unless the person takes an oath. We believe that it is reasonable to require an ID card with a photograph, if available, in order to verify the identity of electors and ensure the integrity of the election system.

People whose names are not on the list of electors but who want to register on polling day or at an advance polling station will have to prove their residence by presenting identification with a civic address because the list of electors does not have any information in it that would make it possible to compare a mailing address or an incomplete civic address.

The government's purpose here is to adjust our aim. The verification of residence bill makes the identification requirements more flexible for electors who do not have a piece of identification with a street address on it when they have to prove their residence in order to vote. We what we wanted to do with Bill C-31 was not to restrict the criteria for qualification as an elector but to change the way in which the elector exercises the right to vote.

• (1310)

We added an additional way of proving one's place of residence by presenting pieces of identification which corroborate the elector's declared identity.

We believe as legislators that we should do everything in our power to ensure that there are no more cases of impersonation at elections.

We believe that the integrity of the democratic process needs to be better protected in elections, something that is absolutely essential to recognize political rights.

We are also very aware of the fact that no bill should have the direct or indirect effect of depriving a person of his or her right to vote.

[English]

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am looking at the changes here in Bill C-18.

Government Orders

Let us assume the voter is a senior who does not drive. Right off, he or she does not have a driver's licence with a photo. Perhaps the person has a very old health card. If that person happens to live in Ontario, the health card does not have the person's photo, so that does not work. Perhaps the person would then pull out a credit card. There is no address on the credit card. Perhaps the person belongs to a local art gallery or museum, but there is no address on those. Maybe they have a credit card from a local store like The Bay, Sears or Shopper's Drug Mart. However, there is no address on those cards either. What about the citizenship card? There is no address on the citizenship card either.

In those cases, how does this bill actually help these poor seniors who have been in Canada for maybe 30 years, 40 years or even longer? They might even have been born here. They do not have ID with an address because they do not drive. We do know that 20% of Canadians do not drive. If those people happen to have moved not too long ago, their names are not even on the voter's list.

How would this bill help someone with a problem of that nature? Yes, the bill does fix the rural problem. The one million voters that were left off the list are now back on it, but how would it actually help those seniors who do not have an ID with an address on it?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Pauline Picard: Mr. Speaker, Bill C-31 asks electors to bring a piece of photo ID when they go to the polling station. That does not present a problem in Quebec, because driver's licences and health insurance cards have photographs. However, the Chief Electoral Officer has authorized two original pieces of identification, one of which can establish your name and the other your residential address.

The identification card can be a health insurance card, social insurance card, birth certificate, driver's licence, Canadian passport, a credit card to identify the name, a Canadian Forces identity card, a health card, employer card or old age security card, or a public transportation card. There are also documents that can establish name and address, such as a credit card statement, a bank statement, a utility bill such as a telephone, cable, hydro, gas or water bill, or a bill from a public utilities commission. This can also be a local property tax assessment, a residential lease or, for students, a school report card or transcript; and the list goes on.

An older person will have no problem voting, and could even go in with another elector who will vouch for him or her, if that elector has all of the pieces of identification. Everything has been done in Bill C-18 to facilitate things and to remedy the mistake that was made in Bill C-31, which contained the restriction that prevented some people who have post office boxes from proving their address. This bill corrects the mistake that interfered with a million people in Canada voting.

I do not think this poses any problems of the kind suggested by my colleague in the NDP. I know the New Democrats do not support this. We have often seen this in committee, particularly when it comes to bills that require identification. They think this means that homeless people would not be allowed to exercise their right to vote. Everything is being done, however, in the present Bill C-18, to accommodate those people.

The right to vote is also a responsibility that rests on every citizen. Everyone must be informed about how that right can be exercised.

I have just come from a meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, at which the Chief Electoral Officer spoke as a witness. He informed us that he is in the process of initiating a broad campaign to raise awareness everywhere in Canada, to genuinely inform the public about their rights and the methods available to them for exercising the responsible right that the right to vote represents.

• (1315)

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I was listening to the hon. member for Drummond talk about the millions of people who will not have the right to vote, especially in rural regions. I represent a primarily rural region and this worries me a bit.

In light of this problem, I would like to know what the hon. member thinks of an elector ID card system. I would like her opinion on the possibility of everyone having an elector ID card.

Ms. Pauline Picard: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for her question. I think having an elector ID card could resolve a number of problems. Mind you, the system will never be perfect. There is always some problem we need to address. It is also the role of the Chief Electoral Officer in every general election or byelection to take note of the shortcomings and try his best to correct them.

Nonetheless, there will always be the possibility of fraud or mistake. In my opinion, it would be a good exercise for the government to look into the possibility of having an elector identification card to reduce the possibility of fraud or mistake.

• (1320)

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague's speech brings me into this debate, as does the NDP speech. Is it not essential for us to ensure the integrity of our electoral system? I see that the NDP position is to have electors who do not have identification swear an oath in order to vote. Is that not irresponsible?

The very least we must do to ensure the integrity of the electoral system is to require identification with a photo, if possible, but not necessarily. I understand, since the current Elections Act requires a piece of identification with the person's home address, that this might be very difficult to enforce, because more than a million electors do not meet these criteria.

Unlike the NDP proposal whereby an oath is enough, should we not at least require a piece of photo ID, if possible, in order to ensure the integrity of our system?

Ms. Pauline Picard: Mr. Speaker, I think that the NDP's proposal, which would give voting rights to any person who swears an oath, is unacceptable. That proposal was rejected by the other three political parties last session during consideration of Bill C-31.

We believe it is reasonable to require photo identification, if available, to verify the identity of voters and ensure the integrity of the electoral system.

Government Orders

I would like to point out that there have been serious fraud cases. The time when someone could pile a bunch of people onto a bus and have a voter swear an oath to identify them is over.

[*English*]

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to Bill C-18. Of course, if all members of the House had done their job when Bill C-31 was before the committee, we would not be in this position.

The parliamentary secretary spoke about the fact that the NDP opposed Bill C-31 simply because it was concerned about homeless people. There are a couple of things I would like to say about that. I am sure the parliamentary secretary could not possibly be suggesting that homeless people should not vote. We know that homelessness is a rising crisis in this country and that there are increasing numbers of homeless people in Canada. I would be very surprised to hear members of the House say that homeless people should be disenfranchised.

I point to the preliminary report of the UN special rapporteur, Miloon Kothari, that was released on October 22. It talked about the fact that Canada has a crisis in housing. We have a national crisis that is in an emergency situation. We know that independent sources are talking about increasing homelessness. We know homeless people often do not have identification that would allow them to vote.

Members of the Bloc are suggesting that somehow the New Democrats are not in favour of integrity in the voting system and that is absolute nonsense. The member for Vancouver East had a very concrete suggestion, one that has been used in Vancouver East, which was the use of statutory declarations for people who showed up with no identification and were not on the voters list.

NDPers are certainly very conscious of maintaining the integrity of the voting system and of ensuring there is no fraud, but I am also very aware that the Chief Electoral Officer also indicated that fraud is by no means rampant in this country. One wonders, when we attempt to use a sledgehammer on a small isolated problem, what the overall intent is.

When the parliamentary secretary answered a question I asked him about what this particular bill before us was going to do for people who were going to be disenfranchised, living in transient shelters and homeless, he indicated that the quote I read was actually not a quote of his from Bill C-18 when in fact it was his response to Bill C-18 amendments proposed by the Senate.

When the former Bill C-31 came back to the House for further review and consideration, I want to point out to members that New Democrats not only identified problems with that bill, and I am going to talk about some of them, but they also proposed solutions. They were concerned about rural voters in small communities. They talked about them being in small isolated communities. Not all rural communities are small and isolated, but we were certainly conscious of the fact that other community members could be disenfranchised.

On June 18, in response to amendments to Bill C-31 proposed by the Senate, the parliamentary secretary said:

What we are trying to do, by presenting a bill that will give increased and expanded voting opportunities for all Canada, is attempt to raise the level of voter turnout.

What we actually did with Bill C-31, in effect, is disenfranchise nearly a million rural voters. When those kinds of comments are made, one wonders if homelessness was considered as well.

The parliamentary secretary went on to say again on June 18, 2007, regarding amendments to Bill C-31 from the Senate:

I think there is no greater fraud that could be perpetrated on Canadians than that of an individual voting in a federal or provincial election who pretends to be someone that he or she is not.

Surely, there is also a fraud in disenfranchising voters. People have talked about section 3 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. When we pass legislation that says Canadians will not be allowed to vote because of where they live in rural Canada, surely that is perpetrating a fraud.

● (1325)

On that very same day of June 18, in response to Bill C-31 amendments from the Senate, the Minister for Democratic Reform said:

As I have mentioned on other occasions, this bill makes a number of changes to the electoral process that will reduce the opportunity for electoral fraud, improve the accuracy of the national register and the lists of electors, facilitate communication with the electorate and improve the administration of elections. These are changes that will be of benefit to all parties, to all candidates, and to all Canadians because it will make our electoral system, and in turn our democracy, stronger.

The Minister for Democratic Reform was supporting a piece of legislation that was actually going to make sure that some Canadians could not vote. How is that possibly in keeping with provisions for making our democracy stronger? In fact, in the government's rush to reduce a virtually non-existent fraud problem, it has actually made sure that well over a million Canadians will not be able to vote.

The bill attempts to correct that. If we are going to correct a piece of flawed legislation, I would argue that we need to correct all of the issues that were identified when Bill C-31 came forward initially.

Often in the House, we hear people talking about accountability, transparency, and fiscal responsibility. Bill C-31 was before the House and the Conservatives, the Liberals and the Bloc pushed it through despite some very strong reservations identified by New Democrats, and solutions suggested as well I might add. Now we are in the process of fixing a flawed piece of legislation at what cost to taxpayers.

We have a responsibility when legislation comes before the House. I have heard members say that not every piece of legislation is perfect and we have to do what we can do to get things through the House. However, when we do things hastily and without adequate consideration for broad ranging impact, we end up not only delaying the process, but we end up spending far more money than we needed to spend in the first place.

When the government brought in Bill C-18 to fix the problem of disenfranchised rural voters, it was not fixing the problems with respect to people who perhaps were homeless or living on low incomes. Does that mean we will have to bring another bill back before the House, at great expense to taxpayers, in order to fix a problem that should have been fixed when Bill C-31 was originally before the House?

I heard the parliamentary secretary speak about the fact that the primary reason that New Democrats opposed the original bill was because of our great concern for homeless people. We are absolutely concerned about people who are homeless. Whether it is their right to vote, their right to adequate shelter, and everything in between like health care, liveable wages, adequate education, we are concerned. I am very proud as a New Democrat to stand up and speak about these things in the House.

New Democrats identified a number of issues in Bill C-31 which are not being addressed in Bill C-18 and are still going to continue to be a problem.

We talked about the fact that the bill would result in thousands of individuals not being able to exercise their right to vote because of a lack of proper identification due to poverty, illness, disability or having no stable address. This also included people who were temporarily housed in transition shelters. We put forward a recommendation around the statutory declaration as an alternate means of identification for an elector to prove his or her identity.

We also talked about the fact that there were some serious problems with the vouching system. With the vouching system, one person can vouch only for one voter.

● (1330)

Sometimes, for example, there may be someone who lives in a riding and works a lot with people who are homeless, some of the street workers, who often have daily contact with people who are homeless. That person would only be able to vouch for one of those people who he or she works with on a regular basis. We were arguing that using that vouching system is a legitimate way to say that someone should be able to prove who they are and that one should be able to vouch for more than one person. That seems perfectly reasonable.

Surely, if one's credentials are good enough to vouch for one person, they should be good enough to vouch for five, six or ten people. What difference does it make?

I want to highlight the fact again that when New Democrats were speaking about the problems with Bill C-31, which have not been fixed in Bill C-18, they were identifying more than homelessness as an issue. The member for Vancouver East, in a very good speech that outlined a number of the problems and potential solutions, said:

What is being offered as the main solution to this problem is a voter identification system. In looking at the bill and knowing where this came from at committee, we want to express some of our concerns about what may be the unintended consequences of the ID system on voters. In particular, we are concerned about how this would impact low income people, people who live in small remote communities and aboriginal people who do not have the necessary ID outlined in the bill.

Clearly, the member for Vancouver East, who is a very experienced member of the House and has been a tireless advocate for homeless people, was also talking about people who are not only homeless but who lived in small and remote communities and aboriginal people.

Therefore, I think that is a very good example of how New Democrats talked about issues that included the homeless and others. Further on in her speech she talked about a solution. She said:

However, I have looked at this carefully and have talked to lawyers in my community who have been involved in providing assistance around statutory

Government Orders

declarations for voters with no ID, and they are very concerned, as I am, about what this provision will mean. At present, it is acceptable for a voter to make a statutory declaration along with a person in the community who can identify the voter. In the downtown east side, it has often been a street worker, someone who knows many of the people in the community, who vouches for the individual. Under the new bill, [Bill C-31], this would no longer be allowed.

Bill C-18, which is before the House, does not take into account that provision that would have prevented the disenfranchisement of a number of people in our communities. The member went on to say:

We are prepared to see this bill go to committee. The government has said that it is willing to look at amendments—

We, of course, know that what happened is neither the government, nor the Liberals, nor the Bloc supported some of the amendments that the NDP put forward. This is the important part. The member also said:

—to ensure that by dealing with voter fraud, we are not at the same time unintentionally disenfranchising people who have a right to vote, who want to vote and who are voting legitimately, but would be precluded from doing so by these new provisions.

We have seen the first round of people who will be disenfranchised by Bill C-31.

I talked a bit about the vouching system and how extremely complicated it is in terms of the fact that we have one person who can vouch only for one person.

The member for Ottawa Centre, again a tireless defender of democratic reform and people's right to vote, in his speech against Bill C-31, and this is prescient, identified some problems that could occur. He said, "I would hate to see unintended consequences that would do the same here". In this context he was referring to some problems that happened in the civil rights movement in the United States where people were, some would argue, intentionally disenfranchised and there were court challenges that resulted from that. He said:

We have seen laws in this country that have done that. I refer to B.C. and its so-called section 80, whereby people were not able to get on the voters list until the actual day of the election simply because of a flawed enumeration system. It is important to acknowledge, with the way the bill is presently written, that a charter challenge could happen.

The member for Ottawa Centre spoke about the fact that there could be unintended consequences of the bill and what do we see but over one million voters in Canada not able to vote because of this very deeply flawed bill.

● (1335)

The member goes on to talk about solutions. People in the House have said that New Democrats only oppose things, not propose things. That is wrong. We talked about the fact that enumeration, which has been cancelled, would have been a very good way to ensure that we had the best possible electoral list so that people would be accurately reflected on that voters list. It would certainly ease voting when it comes to voting day. That would have been one solution, along with the use of statutory declarations.

Government Orders

One of the members referred to the fact that New Democrats are not doing anything on democratic reform. Again, that is absolute utter nonsense because we know the previous member, Ed Broadbent, with whom I was very proud to serve as a member of the New Democrat caucus, presented a very detailed plan on democratic reform. Part of that plan dealt with corporate lobbyists. When we talk about democratic reform, we had the member for Winnipeg Centre yesterday pointing out the fact that measures to deal with corporate lobbyists under the Accountability Act still have not been put in place.

The member for Winnipeg Centre has been tireless in talking about ethics and accountability in this House.

We have a government that ran on a platform of accountability and so-called clean government and now we have a situation of Conservative corporate lobbyists who, because of the Conservatives' failure to enact certain provisions of Bill C-2, the Accountability Act, they have pretty much a free licence these days.

Mr. Pat Martin: An infestation.

Ms. Jean Crowder: An infestation, as the member for Winnipeg Centre points out.

This is all about democratic reform and accountability in our voting system.

We also had an opportunity in this House to put forward proportional representation and members of this House folded like a stack of cards. We had an opportunity to ensure every vote counted so that we did not end up with a government that sometimes ended up with a majority when it only had 35% of the vote. Now that truly is a democratic reform initiative.

The member for Vancouver Island North brought forward a motion proposing electoral reform that would have substantially impacted on the way this House operates. Instead, members chose to disregard that very good motion. Canada is one of the few western democracies left that does not have some form of proportional representation.

I think New Democrats have a very proud history of fighting for democratic reform, electoral reform and for standing up for working class and middle class families to ensure their vote actually counts for something in this House. We are proud to be in the forefront in that area.

To get back to Bill C-18, I want to emphasize how broad the scope is of this problem. In a CTV news story on November 2, it stated:

Elections Canada last week disclosed that one million rural Canadians do not have a proper residential or civic address—complete with street name and number—as envisaged by the original legislation.

—that is Bill C-31—

Rural addresses are more often post office boxes or rural route numbers. On native reserves, a resident's address is sometimes simply the name of the reserve. The problem is particularly acute in the North, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Under this bill, many communities in our province simply would not have the right to have their votes registered. Our member for Timmins—James Bay is one of those. The member for Timmins—James Bay has called on this House to not only look at the

disenfranchisement of rural voters, but also to look at the disenfranchisement of homeless people, transients, students, other rural people and aboriginal people. The list is very long.

When Elections Canada released its report, it gave some specific numbers, which I think are important. It released a report to Parliament saying that 4.4% of eligible voters do not have the proper address required by law. In Nunavut, 80.75% of the voters cannot offer a street name or address; 27.3% in Saskatchewan; and 23% in Newfoundland and Labrador. That is a serious problem.

I am hoping the House will look at the impact Bill C-18 would have on rural voters but I also hope the House expands its view and looks at all the other people who are disenfranchised.

• (1340)

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Nanaimo—Cowichan for giving such a good overview of the current legislation before us, Bill C-18, as well as its predecessor, Bill C-31 which was approved by this House.

I want to emphasize the points she made. The original bill, Bill C-31, was actually a bill that did not need to come forward. It was a bill that was manufactured by the government based on alleged voter fraud that really does not exist.

There are isolated cases from time to time but the chief electoral officer and Elections Canada have a very good system for following that up and actually zeroing in on where there may be potential fraud.

Therefore, this bill, in its previous form, was never required in the first place. What it did was it disenfranchised millions of rural voters, as well as those who live in an urban environment who may not have the necessary ID. There was nothing wrong with the way people in my riding of Vancouver East voted but they were suddenly disenfranchised by Bill C-31, as they will be by this new bill.

It is quite astounding that a problem that never existed has now become a problem because of legislation that has been created by the government.

We know about the rural voters and the fact that is why this new version of the bill has come forward, but is it also not the case that there are other voters who will be disenfranchised? Unfortunately, there is nothing in this bill that will correct the situation for those people. They are mostly people in inner cities, homeless people, people without ID and who have every right to vote. As a result of this legislation, they will still find it difficult to vote, if not impossible. They will, in effect, be disenfranchised.

I know I and my colleagues have pressed very hard to get this message through. It is quite alarming that not only did the government not listen, but the Liberal Party and the Bloc Québécois rejected those arguments as well and went along with this bill. Now we have the second version of the bill back and it is still a flawed bill.

I would ask the member to comment on how this impacts people in the urban environment as well.

Government Orders

•(1345)

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, many people who live in urban environments are transient. I spoke earlier about the UN special rapporteur's report on housing and homelessness in Canada, and it is no wonder. People are facing a crisis. Many people who live in cities simply do not have an ID or a residence address but they can be vouched for under a statutory declaration. It is a fairly widespread problem.

I want to quote from a blog on the CTV website. It is from someone in the Gulf Islands who said, "Well, I guess I won't be voting in the next election. I live on a small Gulf Island off the B.C. coast. We were recently assigned house numbers for this island but pick up mail on a different island and our voting stations are on a third island. A few years ago I was turned away at the polls because my driver's licence address (place I live) didn't match my voters card address (mailing address). Here we go again...."

That kind of thing happens all over Canada.

In one of the advance polls in the last election, a person who lived on one Gulf Island had to travel to Vancouver Island to cross over to another Gulf Island to vote in the advance poll.

If we are going to talk about how we actually ensure voters legitimately vote in this country, we need to fix some of the problems that are in the system that have been clearly identified, instead of doing the kinds of things in Bill C-31, which actually made sure voters could not vote.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague has put forward many good arguments. Over the past while in Parliament, before the summer break, we worked diligently on this issue trying to understand what was driving the government agenda in actually developing Bill C-31 in the first place.

Is it a question of voter fraud? We had four cases of voter fraud in the last four elections. That is not sufficient to bring forward an act to this Parliament.

Is it a question that somehow our system of voting is under scrutiny, that the elaborate system of returning officers, scrutineers and the complete system of Canadian voting, which is probably one of the best in the world, is somehow under suspicion? Are we letting too many people through the gate? Is it because some people walking into the polls are unable to identify themselves in many instances?

Yes, there are some problems but did it require this kind of authoritarian hammer that came down in terms of Bill C-31? Or, is this something else? Is this really about social conditioning? Is the bill one of the steps that is leading us toward a more authoritarian state where everything we do must be qualified with some form of identification, where we are moving toward government identity cards and where we are taking the steps that will lead us to a society that Canadians will not like? Or, are the steps being taken small ones so that Canadians will be conditioned to accept this kind of burden?

What does my hon. colleague think was the motive behind the government moving ahead with this legislation, wasting our time in Parliament and creating a situation where, in the next election, we

will have massive confusion at the polls, which will turn many people off voting? What was the government's purpose in all of this?

•(1350)

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, that is a very good question. It remains somewhat of a mystery because the chief electoral officer himself talked about the fact that fraud in our electoral system was a rare and unusual case.

Instead of dealing with the circumstances as they arose, this is the government's response. It makes great political rhetoric because the government can say that it is protecting the integrity of the voting system. However, the integrity of the voting system, by and large, is just fine, thanks very much. Instead, what we had was a response that far outweighed the problem.

What happens when we develop responses that far outweigh the problems identified is that mistakes are made. Instead, we have created a far greater problem with this flawed piece of legislation.

There is a creeping notion and we are seeing it any number of ways. We now have no-fly lists. What is happening in this day and age in our country in terms of protecting the integrity of certain systems when we have this kind of legislation creeping in?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Peterborough, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is probably nothing more important in a democracy than to have integrity in the voting system, integrity in results. It is critically important that everybody who wants their voice heard in an election have that opportunity.

However, it is also critically important that the results of an election, the results in all 308 ridings, are beyond question, that they are above any sort of suspicion that there may be a problem in the voting system.

It is right for members of Parliament to look at the system from time to time to ensure the integrity of the system is beyond reproach.

Does the member feel that the previous system was perfect or is it right for Parliament, from time to time, to look at the system and ensure the integrity is there and that the results of an election in any riding cannot be questioned?

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, of course New Democrats are absolutely concerned with the integrity of the system. That is why we are really concerned with a bill that actually disenfranchised a million voters. When we talk about the integrity of the system, surely a bill that actually does not let people vote when they legitimately should be able to vote speaks to a lack of integrity in that bill.

New Democrats again have suggested ways to make sure people could vote legitimately.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Richmond—Arthabaska has 20 minutes, but I will have to interrupt him at 2 p.m.

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I understand completely. This is going to be a very important question period.

Statements by Members

It is my pleasure to speak to Bill C-18, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (verification of residence). A few minutes ago, my colleague from Drummond discussed this and stated that the Bloc Québécois supports Bill C-18 in principle.

The purpose of the bill is to close some of the loopholes in Bill C-31. All of our colleagues who have spoken to Bill C-31 talked about problems that resulted from the adoption of Bill C-31. People did not pass it in bad faith to cause problems, but, as is frequently the case, they realized after the fact that there were some problems. That is what happened with Bill C-31, which attempted to minimize opportunities for fraud or error by strengthening requirements related to voter identification. People were asked to produce identification that included their home address. That was when a pretty serious problem surfaced.

Elections Canada revealed that at least one million Canadians do not have a proper residential address, that is, an address with a civic number and street name, as required by Bill C-31. This might seem strange or unusual to someone who lives in the city and has always had a civic address with a street name. This does not mean, however, that these other people have nowhere to live. We are familiar with the plight of the homeless. However, there are also people who live in a rural setting who do not have that kind of address. It is not the same thing. They do not have a civic number and street name. They may simply have a rural route number. For instance, in the case of first nations peoples, their address might simply be the name of the reserve and nothing else. The address is just as valid, but it is not the kind of address that city dwellers tend to have.

One million voters represent 4.4% of all eligible voters in Canada. As I was saying, in rural settings, addresses often consist of post office boxes or rural routes. On first nations reserves, residential addresses often consist only of the name of the reserve. In order to ensure a healthy democratic process, everyone must, if possible, have the right to vote, which is an inalienable right.

Those who have a rural route as their address, for instance, cannot call upon a vouching elector from the same polling division, because he or she will have a similar address. If a voter brings along their neighbour or their roommate because they do not have all the documentation required by the law, the problem is that the other person will have more or less exactly the same address. They will have the same problem, that is, no civic number or street name. Therein lies the problem in Bill C-31.

This situation affects about one million people in Canada. Fortunately, the number is much smaller in Quebec, but there are people who do have that problem. Indeed, 15,836 voters, or 0.27% of all electors in Quebec were found to have an address that can be described as incomplete. They find themselves in the situation that I described earlier, in that they do not necessarily have a civic number or a street name. So, a solution had to be found to allow the greatest possible number of people to exercise their right to vote, a right—and I am saying it again, because it is important—that is unalienable.

So, Bill C-18 was drafted. However, the democratic process must be conducted while trying to prevent fraud as much as possible. Now, we joke about the days when people used to say that political parties would sometimes make dead people vote. We laugh, but it is not funny, because it was the reality. Some people did use that ploy

at one time. Whenever the possibility exists, dishonest people will try to use all sorts of schemes to win elections in a fraudulent and illegal manner. That was done in the past. People would go to the cemetery, write down the name of a dead person, find his old address, and then go and vote while using the dead person's identity. This really happened.

In more recent times—unfortunately, this may still be happening, but it definitely did in the rather recent past—some people would vote by doing nothing less than to steal another voter's identity.

• (1355)

I do not believe I am mistaken in saying that this happened in the borough of Anjou, in Quebec. In the very recent past, it was proven that people were engaging in this fraudulent practice. Someone was elected because people—called floating voters—had been paid to vote for that person by stealing other voters' identities. This is a serious problem that must be prevented. That is why the NDP's suggestion that people simply take an oath in order to have the right to vote is highly problematic. It is not enough.

Bill C-18 amends the Canada Elections Act to relax the rules on verifying residence for voters who live in areas where the municipal address on pieces of identification consists of a post office box, general delivery or a rural route. The bill provides that if the mailing address on the pieces of identification provided does not prove the voter's residence, but is consistent with the information related to that voter on the voters list, the voter's residence is deemed to have been proven. For example, a voter whose identification shows an address limited to a rural route can prove his residence if that mailing address matches the information on the voters list.

In the case of someone who is vouching for another voter, the bill requires that the voucher first prove his or her own identity and residence. If the address on the voucher's identification matches the information related to the voucher on the voters list, that address can be used to prove the voucher's residence.

I will conclude by saying that if there is any doubt, the deputy returning officer, poll clerk, candidate or candidate's representative can ask the voter to take the prescribed oath. This is what is proposed in Bill C-18. As I said earlier, the Bloc Québécois supports this bill in principle.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

• (1400)

[English]

SINCLAIR CUTCLIFFE

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wish to pay tribute to one of P.E.I.'s finest sons, Sinclair Cutcliffe, who passed away Saturday.

*Statements by Members***YOUTH RENDEZ-VOUS**

Sinclair spent his lifetime helping others and was strongly committed to his family, his community and Canada. He was active in many capacities, key among them being past owner and director of Cutcliffe Funeral Home. He was a provincial MLA and deputy speaker, a stalwart Liberal activist, a founding member of the Hillsborough Rotary Club, provider of ambulance services and first aid training to nurses and firefighters. For his years in first aid he won the highest honour, the Order of the Red Cross.

Although he never sat in this chamber having made one attempt to do so, he still had an influence on this place and federal policy through his active connections with Prime Minister Trudeau and the Liberal Party. The stories he could tell.

Canada and Prince Edward Island are a better place because of Sinclair Cutcliffe. We thank his family and we wish them well.

* * *

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as our government took office almost 22 months ago, there was little doubt that Canadians had grown tired of the scandals and entitlement that had become the watchwords of the former Liberal government. They looked to us to clean up the mess and get government back on track. We have kept that commitment. We have honoured that promise and our work continues.

I am proud to be part of a government that just this week introduced new legislation that goes right to the heart of a more democratic accountable government, giving Canadians a say as to who will represent them in the Senate, limiting Senate terms to eight years, and providing fairness in representation in the House.

We know from experience that the Liberals will flip and flop, obstruct and delay these reforms, just as they did in the last session. It is up to Liberal members and senators to put their romance with the days of privilege behind them, do what Canadians want and expect, stand up and pass these measures without delay here and in the other place.

* * *

*[Translation]***INTERNATIONAL DAY OF TOLERANCE**

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Mr. Speaker, every November 16 is designated as the International Day of Tolerance, a day to advance human welfare, freedom and progress everywhere, as well as to encourage tolerance, respect, dialogue and cooperation among different cultures, civilizations and peoples.

In Darfur, Burma and Colombia, the concept of tolerance is being trampled and severely tested. Closer to home, the Conservative government's tolerance of the minorities in this country also leaves much to be desired.

They are intolerant of women's groups which dare to fight for their rights and for pay equity, intolerant of our workers, from whom they have been stealing billions of dollars for years, and intolerant of Quebeckers, whom they recognize as a nation, even though that does not really mean a thing.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Rendez-vous Jeunesse will bring together some 150 young people to discuss the future of the Acadian peninsula. It will be held November 16 and 17 at the Shippagan campus of the Université de Moncton.

The aim of the meeting, an initiative of the Comité Avenir jeunesse, is to create a platform for discussion and the exchange of ideas regarding the Acadian peninsula's social, economic and educational situation.

The event will consist of workshops and other activities, as young people from near and from afar share their success stories.

This innovative and ambitious project, designed by and for young people, will help boost the development of the Acadian peninsula and serve as preparation for a youth encounter initiative as part of the Congrès mondial acadien in 2009. On behalf of the NDP, I would like to wish Rendez-vous Jeunesse every success.

* * *

*[English]***ALBERTA DIABETES INSTITUTE**

Mr. Rahim Jaffer (Edmonton—Strathcona, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, November 14, marked the celebration of World Diabetes Day. On that same day, Canada's largest diabetes institute opened at the University of Alberta.

The Alberta Diabetes Institute will bring together top researchers in type 1 and type 2 diabetes to work toward prevention, better treatment and an eventual cure of the disease.

The disease affects 150,000 Albertans with 1,000 new patients being diagnosed each month. The opening of this remarkable institute will certainly have a positive effect on the prognosis and management of their disease.

This is the largest free-standing building dedicated to diabetes work in Canada and will house more than 200 researchers. The new building will hold 35 investigator labs for people in physical education, medicine, nutrition, pharmacy and public health.

The lives of Albertans and Canadians living with diabetes will be dramatically improved with the opening of this institute. As a resident of and member of Parliament for Edmonton—Strathcona, I am proud to congratulate Dr. Ray Rajotte and his team for working very hard to make this a reality.

* * *

●(1405)

INCOME TRUSTS

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I hold in my hands a petition from 4,000 Canadians who want to remind the Prime Minister that he once said, "There is no greater fraud than a promise not kept". They are among the million-plus victims of the Prime Minister's broken promise on income trusts.

Statements by Members

Their names were compiled by David Marshall, a retired man from the Cornwall area who worked hard all his life only to see his retirement savings go up in smoke. He delivered these names to me on the first anniversary of the income trust announcement.

What he and millions of Canadians want now is simple. They want the government to uncover the 18 pages of blacked-out documents used to justify destroying their billions of dollars of savings.

Most of all, they want an apology, because the only thing they did wrong was to take the Prime Minister at his word.

* * *

PROJECT RED RIBBON

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Project Red Ribbon officially started on Parliament Hill today.

This national campaign asks Canadians to display a red ribbon on their vehicle or their car keys, purse, backpack or other personal item.

This red ribbon is a tribute to honour those killed or injured in impaired driving crashes. It also serves as a constant message to people on the roads to drive safe and sober.

MADD Canada hopes the red ribbon will also serve as a reminder to call 911 and take action in ensuring our roads are safe.

We can all agree that impaired driving is not to be tolerated. That is why this government has introduced impaired driving measures within the tackling violent crime act. I urge the House to support this important legislation and I urge Canadians to support MADD's valiant efforts by displaying a red ribbon.

* * *

[*Translation*]

ANTI-DOPING

Mr. Luc Malo (Verchères—Les Patriotes, BQ): Mr. Speaker, as the third World Conference on Doping in Sport opens today in Madrid with the objective of revising the World Anti-Doping Code, I would like to highlight the importance of this exercise for the credibility of the world of sport.

Every day, thousands of athletes spare neither time, nor money, nor energy—sometimes to the detriment of their health—to give a performance that will go down in history. They have to deal with the demands of sponsors and the public's judgment. They must never disappoint.

We cannot deny that all this pressure makes doping attractive. However, athletes—as well as their families, doctors and trainers—must realize that doping is illegal and must not be trivialized.

This third conference should also eliminate the threat of moving the agency's main office, currently located in Montreal. The Secretary of State, now in Madrid, must accept nothing less.

[*English*]

PROJECT RED RIBBON

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Mr. Speaker, impaired driving is a crime that is 100% preventable. That is why on November 13 volunteers for Mothers Against Drunk Driving from my riding of Prince Edward—Hastings launched their 2007 red ribbon campaign.

Last year this Conservative government introduced Bill C-32, which provided police with the tools to detect drug impaired driving. This bill, now part of Bill C-2, the tackling violent crime act, whose legislative committee I am proud to be a part of, authorizes police officers to conduct a series of tests to determine if a driver is impaired by a drug or a combination of alcohol and drugs.

There is general agreement in this House and in this country that drug impaired driving represents a serious criminal justice, health and traffic safety issue in Canada. Drug users are disproportionately involved in fatal accidents and impaired driving is still the number one criminal cause of death in Canada.

This Christmas season and throughout the year, I urge all Canadians to display a red ribbon in an effort to stop impaired driving.

* * *

● (1410)

FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION MONTH

Mr. Brian Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, November is Family Violence Prevention Month.

Family violence is about power and control, not just conflict or anger.

[*Translation*]

In 1998, the Statistics Canada report entitled, "Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile" showed that women still outnumber men two to one as victims of spousal abuse. It also indicated that three times more women than men were killed by their spouse or partner.

[*English*]

Today I wish to acknowledge Crossroads for Women, a transition house in my riding, which has assisted more than 7,500 women and their children living with family violence over the past 26 years. Crossroads for Women also offers the second stage facility of eight safe and affordable units with services for women and their children who want to break the cycle of family violence and live in a violence-free environment.

Let us pause and reflect on concrete actions we can take in all of our communities to prevent and eliminate domestic violence affecting women and their children.

Statements by Members

[Translation]

BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS

Mr. Denis Lebel (Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with the Conservatives in power, the Bloc is trying in every way possible to justify its presence in Ottawa. Today the leader of the Bloc and his current heir apparent are accusing the Conservative government of reducing Quebec's weight in this House.

Is it not ironic to see the Bloc worry about Quebec's representation within Canadian institutions? The hon. member for Joliette said, and I quote, "We are not here to reform Canadian institutions. We want out." While the hon. member for Saint-Jean said that the future is in the National Assembly, not in Ottawa.

Considering that party's *raison d'être*, the Bloc is simply being hypocritical and inconsistent.

The Bloc should tell the truth and acknowledge that if it were anything more than a think tank, Quebec's representation in the House of Commons would go from 75 members to none at all.

Contrary to the Bloc's objective, our government is protecting the number of seats Quebec has in the House of Commons, which will never be less than the current 75.

* * *

[English]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have been calling for a full review of the use of tasers since 2004, shortly after their implication in the deaths of two people who lived in my riding of Vancouver East.

We learned yesterday that after only 30 seconds on the scene at the Vancouver airport, the RCMP tasered Mr. Dziekanski at least twice, with charges of 50,000 volts. Moments later, he was dead.

In too many instances, tasers are being used on the homeless, people with mental health problems or drug use problems and essentially the most marginalized people in our communities.

There are no clear national standards for the use of tasers and little understanding of their impact. Two more men died in Quebec after being tasered earlier this year. We cannot wait for one more victim before action is taken.

Until strict standards are in place, until we can know that tasers are safe and until we can be sure that tasers are being used properly, they should not be in use. We call for a full and comprehensive review of the use of tasers.

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as parliamentary committees attempted to resume their work yesterday, evidence of the Conservatives' 200 page obstruction manual surfaced in full force: stacking procedural committees with government members; reducing quorum to require only one opposition member; allowing political staff from parties to attend

in camera meetings; and destroying transcripts after only one year instead of the traditional 30 year period.

These are just a few of the proposals put forward by the government in an attempt to delay and destroy the work of parliamentary committees.

I urge my parliamentary colleagues to remain vigilant to ensure that the essential work of committees can proceed. Colleagues, stand warned.

* * *

[Translation]

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Ms. Pauline Picard (Drummond, BQ): Mr. Speaker, since September something very distressing has been going on in the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Conservative members have been systematically stalling committee work since the introduction of a motion requiring that the questionable accounting practices of the Conservative Party during the last general election be examined by the committee, on camera, so that Quebeckers and Canadians can see for themselves that the Conservatives' grand promises of transparency and honesty were nothing but smoke and mirrors.

This has been going on meeting after meeting. All the Bloc Québécois is trying to do is understand why the Conservative Party is the only party in the House whose expense claims were investigated by Elections Canada.

If the Conservative members truly believe they have nothing to hide, they should stop stalling committee work so that we can get to the bottom of this rather troubling issue.

* * *

●(1415)

[English]

AIRBUS

Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I, as do many Canadians, ask the Prime Minister to provide the public the full details of the cash that former prime minister Brian Mulroney received from Karlheinz Schreiber in 1993-94.

The public is demanding answers.

What was the money paid for? Why was it paid in cash? Why was it paid in hotel rooms? Why did Mr. Mulroney not pay taxes on the money until it was disclosed to the public later on? What was the purpose of the meeting in Zurich? Why did the Prime Minister not do anything when his office was notified in March of this year?

Until these answers are provided, there is a dark cloud over the government and over all government agencies and departments.

Oral Questions

For example, Revenue Canada will have difficulty auditing other Canadians. How can it charge other Canadians? How can it penalize other Canadians? Canadians will use this excuse: "Give me the same deal that was given to Mulroney".

I hope the Prime Minister, for the sake of the government and for the sake of this institution of Parliament, will ensure that Canadians are given these answers as soon as absolutely possible.

* * *

LIBERAL PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in recent years a growing number of Canadians have come to realize that the Liberal Party does not actually stand for anything, but who would have guessed that this fall it would turn "not standing" into its defining characteristic?

First the Liberals abstained from the Speech from the Throne. Next they abstained from the ways and means motion to reduce the GST to five per cent. Yesterday they extended their abstention strategy beyond just confidence votes to abstain on a Bloc opposition day motion.

Where I come from, there is a commonly shared principle that if one does not vote one cannot complain. I know the whole concept of principles is not really high on the Liberal Party's priority list and that the whole priorities thing does not come easily to the Liberal leader, but until the Liberals develop a list of priorities that they can stand up for one way or another, perhaps they should offer up their official opposition status to a party that actually knows what it believes.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

AIRBUS

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister wants to limit the political fallout from the Mulroney-Schreiber affair, so he prevents Dr. Johnston from investigating the behaviour of the Conservative government over the last 22 months.

The terms of reference for Dr. Johnston include only specific financial dealings between Mr. Mulroney and Mr. Schreiber. They do not include any negligence, wilful blindness, interference, invasion or concealment by the Prime Minister, his office, his ministers or Conservative insiders.

Why did the Prime Minister exempt himself from this investigation?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we did no such thing. Mr. Johnston is free to propose any terms of reference that are in any way connected with the events in question.

Canadians understand that the events in question occurred between 10 and 20 years ago. These are rather pathetic attempts by the opposition to link them to this government.

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is not Dr. Johnston's credibility that is at stake here; it is the Prime Minister's.

Dr. Johnston has been hired to look only at Mulroney-Schreiber financial dealings, nothing more. He cannot examine Privy Council officials or political staff about the paper trail into the Prime Minister's Office. That would be beyond his mandate. He cannot find out who ordered the justice department to stop a fresh investigation, which the department began last year, because that would be beyond his mandate.

What is the government so afraid that he will find?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said, Professor Johnston can recommend any terms of reference that are in any way related to the affairs at hand.

I would not say the only person's credibility, but one of the people's credibility who is very much in question this week is the member for Wascana, who actually suggested that the government would break the law and release private tax records.

When we hear that kind of recommendation, we understand why the previous government had to pay out \$2.1 million in taxpayer money.

● (1420)

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the question was whether Mr. Mulroney complied with the law.

The Mulroney-Schreiber issue reignited in the media only days after the government came into power. There are damning letters in the Prime Minister's Office, but the paper trail is hidden.

Ministers deliberately refused to be briefed. A justice department review was started and then suddenly stopped. Some ministers consult Mr. Mulroney daily. He has numerous personal encounters with the Prime Minister. Was Mr. Schreiber ever discussed?

Will the Prime Minister change the mandate to include specifically whether the government was involved in a cover-up?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, all the allegations made by the member for Wascana are completely baseless. They are complete fabrications.

All they are is designed to try to prove that other people are just as corrupt as the Liberal Party of Canada. I am afraid the Liberal Party of Canada has the trademark on corruption.

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is clear that by not asking Mr. Johnston to investigate the actions of the current government, the Prime Minister is trying to do some damage control. His government's actions with respect to this issue have been questionable.

The Prime Minister admitted to having met with Brian Mulroney at Harrington Lake in the summer of 2006, as Mr. Schreiber indicated. However, we still do not know whether they talked about Mr. Schreiber. Mr. Johnston's terms of reference do not allow him to investigate that.

Oral Questions

What is the Prime Minister trying to hide from Canadians?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the process is very clear. Right after Mr. Schreiber testified that there were allegations, the Prime Minister started the process. That process will give us the answers we are looking for. Canadians want answers. We launched the inquiry process.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that is not all. Mr. Johnston will not investigate whether the letters Mr. Schreiber wrote to the Prime Minister actually reached his office. He will not investigate why the Minister of Justice is refusing to accept any information about the \$2.1 million paid to Brian Mulroney or whether the minister put an end to his own department's investigation into those millions.

Will the Prime Minister let Mr. Johnston find out whether political interference occurred to hide these facts?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the process is clear. Mr. Johnston can set the terms of reference for the inquiry and ask important questions for himself, for Canadians, and also for us.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we learned this morning that Karlheinz Schreiber will be extradited to Germany where he is facing fraud charges. However, Mr. Schreiber's testimony is crucial to the public inquiry concerning former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

Under section 40 of the Extradition Act, the Minister of Justice has the power to refuse to extradite an individual. Why does he refuse to invoke his discretionary power to postpone the extradition of Mr. Schreiber, who is a key witness in this affair?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the judicial process is ongoing. Ultimately, the decision is up to the Minister of Justice. Clearly, the government will not comment on such a judicial process.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in their ruling this morning, the judges called the Minister of Justice's decision a political decision. Yet—and I am referring to their own ruling—in order to delay the extradition, Mr. Schreiber disclosed the explosive allegations against former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, since, once he returns to Germany where he faces fraud charges, delays could arise and slow down the inquiry.

Since the government has the authority to do so, would it not be wiser to postpone the extradition until Mr. Schreiber has a chance to testify?

• (1425)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I cannot comment on a decision that is the exclusive responsibility of the Minister of Justice.

We do recognize, however, that there are two issues of public interest here: on one hand, this government's commitment to conduct a full public inquiry; and on the other hand, to ensure that Mr. Schreiber appears in court to face criminal charges of fraud, tax evasion, bribery and forgery.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the mandates given to David Johnston and Justice Gomery are completely different. After

appointing Justice Gomery it took the government nine days to establish the terms of reference for the inquiry. The Prime Minister has just told us that he is giving David Johnston 57 days to determine the parameters for the future public inquiry, which takes us to January 11, 2008. That is too long.

Rather than dragging things out, should the Prime Minister not be ensuring that the facts come to light as quickly as possible?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Mr. Johnston is free to provide his report much more quickly, if possible. That will be up to him.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, given that there are allegations about the involvement of other individuals, Conservatives and Liberals, in the activities of Mr. Schreiber, it is important to establish as broad a framework for the commission as possible. If the Prime Minister wishes to get to the bottom of it all, it is in his best interest for the commission to review all of Mr. Schreiber's dealings with Canadian politicians in general.

Does the Prime Minister have something to hide?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, Mr. Johnston is free to recommend any terms of reference for the commission. That is up to him. The government has given that power to Mr. Johnston, an eminent and impartial individual. The government has not written the terms of reference for this public inquiry.

However, I am certain that Mr. Johnston will not propose an inquiry into Canadian federalism, desired by the Bloc Québécois.

Mr. Thomas Mulcair (Outremont, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today's *La Presse* makes it clear, as it was to Mr. Schreiber, that the field was a broad one.

For example, Elmer MacKay, whose son is the Minister of National Defence, once worked in Germany for Mr. Schreiber's arms company. Mr. MacKay senior even posted \$100,000 bail for Mr. Schreiber.

Can the Prime Minister tell us whether his Minister of National Defence was at the cabinet meeting where this matter was discussed? Did he recuse himself, yes or no?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, we are going to hear some strange fabrications or accusations like that one.

We now have a process and Mr. Johnston will carry out his mandate. We will find answers and will wait for Mr. Johnston to do his job.

[English]

Mr. Thomas Mulcair (Outremont, NDP): Mr. Speaker, sustainable development is about taking care of future generations. Sustainable corruption is producing the same effect: Marc Lalonde, Liberal minister; Elmer MacKay, Conservative minister; Allan MacEachen, Liberal minister; Brian Mulroney, Conservative prime minister. There were decades of shady dealings with Karlheinz Schreiber, the *sumum* of which was a \$2.1 million Liberal payment to Mulroney for hurting his feelings.

Oral Questions

Will the Prime Minister take a first concrete step and inform Canadians that we will at least get our \$2.1 million back?

• (1430)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, Professor Johnston will draft the terms of reference for the full public inquiry, and that is one matter on which he will obviously make recommendations.

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in March the Prime Minister's Office received serious allegations about the Mulroney-Schreiber affair and now he blames the Privy Council Office for the cover-up.

Does it make sense that a few weeks later the Privy Council would send the Prime Minister to deliver a tribute at an embassy dinner to honour the Rt. Hon. Brian Mulroney? The PCO put out a media advisory, a press release and even published the speech on the government website.

Are Canadians supposed to believe the Privy Council would send the Prime Minister off to praise Brian Mulroney and not warn him about the serious allegations of abuse?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the office of the Prime Minister does not engage in letter writing campaigns with individuals who are facing a variety of charges.

I will say, and it is now a matter of public record, that immediately upon receiving a signed affidavit by Mr. Schreiber of certain allegations, the Prime Minister and this government took action. We will see a process in place, leading to a full public inquiry to explore all of the questions that need to be answered.

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister was not the only government member celebrating Mr. Mulroney. There were 14 cabinet ministers, including the Minister of Transport.

The current defence minister regaled all with a toast. The Prime Minister's speech that night said, "effective leaders in due time are recognized and rewarded. So it is with Mr. Mulroney": \$300,000 worth.

How are Canadians supposed to believe PCO would approve the speech, but not brief the Prime Minister or his staff about the very serious allegations?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, immediately upon receiving a signed affidavit from Mr. Schreiber about certain allegations, the Prime Minister and the government launched what will lead to a full public inquiry.

I think the member opposite should exercise some caution. I understand he may have received some letters already about certain things he has said, and he should be careful.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in February 1998, when Brian Mulroney met with Karlheinz Schreiber at a hotel in Zurich, Switzerland, who was with him? The Minister of Transport's chief of staff, Paul Terrien.

Now that we know that, can the government assure us that it will not limit the inquiry's mandate simply to protect the Minister of

Transport's chief of staff from having to testify under oath as to what really happened that day?

[*English*]

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, anybody who knows and has seen the record of Professor Johnston knows that he is not the type of individual who will be restricted, nor have restrictions been put on him.

What we will see is a very full and public inquiry along the guidelines that he will suggest. We fully expect that all the way along we will hear ridiculous and bizarre assertions from across the way. However, we will be looking for this full public inquiry and we will be looking for the answers it brings forward.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): What we hear are ridiculous answers, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

When Mr. Schreiber indicated to the Prime Minister's Office that he had made an agreement with Brian Mulroney before he left public life, this government tried to cover up the affair for months.

This begs the question. Did the chief of staff for the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, Paul Terrien, play a role in this cover-up operation?

In fact, is the government trying as much as possible to limit the mandate of the public inquiry in order to cover up the role played by Mr. Terrien in this whole affair?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in my opinion, it is clear that hon. members are disappointed because we are now proceeding with a public inquiry. And we will get answers.

It is very important to acknowledge that it was the Prime Minister and the Government of Canada that asked for a public inquiry. And that is exactly what we will have with the suggestion of Mr. Johnston.

* * *

• (1435)

AFGHANISTAN

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the Minister of Foreign Affairs said in this House, "We have no evidence of systematic torture of detainees".

The minister is therefore admitting that there is torture in Afghan prisons, but since it is not systematic, it is not too serious.

I want to remind the minister, who should know this article, that article 12 of the Geneva convention clearly stipulates that prisoners may not be transferred to a country that engages in torture. Yet it continues, whether it is systemic or not.

Does the Prime Minister realize that his government is systematically violating the Geneva convention when it continues—

The Speaker: I am sorry to have to interrupt the hon. member for Saint-Jean.

The hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Oral Questions

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I recently wrote to my counterpart in Afghanistan, the foreign minister, to formally ask that serious, formal, exhaustive investigations be launched into these allegations of abuse.

I want to inform the House that this morning, I had a telephone discussion with my counterpart, the Afghan foreign minister, and he assured me that an investigation was under way into these allegations in Afghanistan. I have the assurance that my government could take part in this investigation, if necessary.

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian government initially claimed that this was Taliban propaganda, that the Taliban were making up stories and that there were no problems in Afghan prisons. Recently, President Karzai said there was a problem, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs admitted as much yesterday.

What is the Prime Minister waiting for to act? What is needed is not investigations, but action by the Prime Minister to suspend prisoner transfers immediately. He can no longer deny the facts. There are seven alleged cases of torture. What is he waiting for to act? He must act now.

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we never said there were no challenges. There are always challenges, and we are working with the Afghan government.

Having said that, I am surprised that my colleague from Saint-Jean is rising to ask a question, because he has said, "Certainly for us, it is a promotion to go to the National Assembly. The future is in the National Assembly, not in Ottawa".

If there is no future here in Ottawa, I suggest that my colleague from Saint-Jean do what his colleague from Saint-Lambert did and go talk to the Parti Québécois about becoming a PQ candidate.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe: This minister is such a jerk!

* * *

MANUFACTURING SECTOR

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in the 1980s, the Bank of Canada's monetary policy, which was tailor-made to resolve Ontario's problems, had disastrous effects on Quebec's economy. Now the same thing is happening again, with the west reaping the benefits at the expense of the manufacturing sector.

Now that even the Bank of Canada is concerned about the devastating effects of the rising dollar on jobs in the manufacturing sector, will the Minister of Finance use his legal power to advise the governor to ensure that the latter's policies will not damage this key sector in Quebec?

[*English*]

Mr. Ted Menzies (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it would not be the habit of this government to interfere with the Bank of Canada. It is completely separate from this government and we would never suggest that we would do that.

We need to remember that jobs are very important to the economy in this country. We all understand the seriousness when people are

losing jobs. There are many other factors, such as the value of the Canadian dollar vis-à-vis the American dollar. There are a lot of other factors involved besides Bank of Canada money rates.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the minister says that he does not want to interfere in monetary policy. Yet, in the debate over a single currency for the Americas, he stated that we have to keep the Canadian dollar in order to retain control over our monetary policy. He cannot have it both ways. It is paradoxical, to say the least.

The Minister of Finance controls the tools that can help the manufacturing sector. When will he hurry up and implement the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology's fiscal recommendations, such as refundable tax credits for research and development and loan guarantees? The time for the government to act is now. Quebec's manufacturing sector is going downhill quickly.

[*English*]

Mr. Ted Menzies (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member had actually read the budget as well as the economic statement, there were a number of measures put in both of those pieces that will stimulate the economy, that will stimulate industry. We have reduced income tax rates for corporations. We have reduced personal income tax rates. We have put in an accelerated capital cost allowance for corporations to invest in machinery to help stimulate their business, to increase the job opportunities for Canadians.

* * *

● (1440)

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the defence minister worked for Mr. Schreiber at Thyssen on the Bear Head project in Cape Breton. That is the project Mr. Mulroney allegedly offered to lobby to move to Quebec for a \$300,000 stash of cash. Former Mulroney staffer, Fred Doucet, is also a key broker in this affair. He set up the Harrington Lake tea time and tried to create a paper trail to cover the tracks. The same Fred Doucet is now registered to lobby the defence minister on seven major procurement projects.

Can the minister tell us when and if his staff had contact with Mr. Schreiber's friend, Fred Doucet?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is very clear what has happened here.

From the very first day when the Prime Minister announced the process of a full public inquiry and leading up to that, from that very first moment the Leader of the Opposition did not understand it, did not get it, did not even hear it.

Really what it comes down to is members opposite are very disappointed that they are about to see the unrolling of a full public inquiry and they are trying to take on the role themselves. We understand that politically, but Canadians are assured a full public inquiry is what is needed and Professor Johnston is looking at the rules that will govern that.

Oral Questions

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Fred Doucet and the defence minister do go way back. They worked on the same contract at Schreiber's company. Mr. Doucet was even in the room when the minister signed his broken pact with David Orchard.

The government is considering a \$45 million space project in Cape Breton. Who is the lobbyist on the file? Fred Doucet.

If the minister's bite is as good as his bark and if he truly believes in accountability, would the defence and ACOA minister please table all records related to lobbying Mr. Doucet has done at either of his ministries?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a full public inquiry is going to answer the questions related to the situation with Mr. Mulroney. That is very clear. That is going to be unfolded.

I have to say we certainly understand the opposition raising questions on this. We have questions. The Prime Minister has questions. Canadians have questions.

But the credibility of the Liberals would be a little bit fortressified while they are asking these questions, they would also help us in some other investigations that are going on, for instance, the \$40 million that somebody over there or some of their friends are still hiding related to the Gomery inquiry. I wish they would help us with that.

* * *

AFGHANISTAN

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in paragraph 20 of the standard operating procedures that Canada uses for inspections, it says explicitly that Canadians may request the return of detainees if there is a danger to them. We know now that since June 2007 the Canadian Forces have transferred more than 83 detainees to the Afghan authorities.

Now that we know there is abuse and torture and that the Conservatives cannot hide it or cover it up any more, will the defence minister order to put an end to these transfers, request that the detainees be returned to Kandahar airfield and show a clear intention this time to respect the Geneva convention?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are very confident of the measures that have been put in place in the May agreement which was a supplementary agreement which improved upon the lacklustre agreement that was in place previous to that.

Clearly, the measures that are taken now do ensure that we have greater access. They do ensure that we have greater ability to track detainees, Taliban prisoners. I am sure that the hon. member opposite has more questions he will want to pose about the well-being of the Taliban prisoners.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have another question for Mr. Schreiber's friend.

What is disappointing here is that the Conservative government knew for a long time that there was torture and did nothing. While

President Karzai was admitting there was torture, the Conservatives were talking about Taliban propaganda.

Prisoners are forced to remain standing for 10 days. They are attached to trees with chains. Some prisoners were even transferred to the Sarpoza prison, where the warden at the time was a known pedophile and child rapist. We know all this and continue the transfers. This is unacceptable.

Does the Prime Minister plan on putting an end to all this and respecting the Geneva Convention once and for all?

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the agreement we reached with the Afghan government last May enables us to have a clear process. Unlike what the government before us did, with this agreement we have conducted 32 interviews with Taliban prisoners and we are making sure that this agreement is respected.

As I said earlier, I spoke with my counterpart this morning. An investigation is currently underway in Afghanistan. This investigation will have clear results. We offered Canada's help and cooperation to the Afghan government, should it need it.

* * *

● (1445)

[*English*]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the media is reporting today that money is being transferred between departments and the Department of Human Resources and Social Development. The article implies that certain initiatives, particularly residential school payments, are being dipped into to finance other programs.

First nations have fought very hard for this compensation and deserve these payments, so could I ask the minister to assure this House that money set aside to compensate all eligible residential school students will get to them?

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the implication that money has been taken from the residential schools programming to fund another program is completely false.

In fact, the \$82 million in the newspaper article has already been sent out to elderly residential school students in a special advance payment. The total of \$1.9 billion that was set aside for the common experience payment for residential school students is available to them. It is being processed and the money is being delivered as we speak. Eligible students are getting their money.

First nations did work very hard for this agreement. I am very proud to say that this government signed that agreement with them. That is good news for aboriginal people who have cited this as a historic step forward, and we are happy to work with them.

AFGHANISTAN

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government has been forced to release thousands of pages of reports that detail abuse and torture in Afghanistan.

Despite being obligated under the detainee agreement to track all prisoners captured by Canadian Forces, the documents clearly show it does not have the resources to do the job. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission has said again that it does not have the resources to do the job either.

Will the government admit it has failed to live up to the agreement, and what steps will it take to ensure that it—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I said, what we did and what I did personally this morning was I called my counterpart in Afghanistan. He assured me that this government and his government will do an investigation, a full, complete investigation, and he is going to keep our government involved in that.

The agreement that we signed is working. We are dealing with the Afghan government. We want to be sure that they respect their obligation and we want to help them to respect their obligation if they need to.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, somehow I do not think a phone call is going to cut it.

The government should not be proud of the fact that it is reporting cases of abuse and torture. It should be ashamed that we are not doing the job that we are obligated to do under international agreements we have signed.

Right now, Canadian policy is to hand over detainees to the Afghan authorities and hope they do the best they can. I am sorry, I am truly sorry, but the men and women of the Canadian Forces deserve better from the government.

Why does the government continue to place our—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are doing our work. We did 32 interviews with Taliban prisoners. We have a full and complete process, an open process. We released yesterday all of the details about what we are doing right now and what we did in the past. It is very clear. It is very transparent. We are working with the Afghan government on this.

[*Translation*]

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we learned yesterday about another specific case of torture involving a prisoner in Afghanistan. Let us be clear: this is torture.

Canada has a responsibility to take these allegations seriously. When will Canada show some leadership? When will it stop transferring prisoners to Afghan authorities? When will it make it clear, once and for all, that torture is simply unacceptable?

• (1450)

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we signed an agreement that allows us to improve upon the

Oral Questions

previous agreement signed by the previous government, an agreement that was not the best of all NATO countries.

What we now have is an agreement that meets the highest standards. We are working with the Afghan government to ensure that, when Taliban prisoners are transferred, the agreement is respected. As I said earlier, there is now an investigation under way in Afghanistan into the treatment of prisoners.

[*English*]

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians expect us to take a leadership role in this issue, not take a page out of the Republican handbook when it comes to the use of torture.

These are specific allegations that the government is specifically choosing to ignore. The Prime Minister likes to cite the existence of an agreement, but he surely cannot be satisfied that the matter is therefore closed.

Allegations of torture continue. Despite the agreement, is the minister not concerned about the mounting specific cases of torture? Or is he content to sit idly by as more detainees are tortured?

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, here is what the *Globe and Mail* said about the agreement we signed, the improved agreement: “The new deal transforms Canada into the standard-bearer for all foreign countries in the monitoring of transferred prisoners in Afghanistan”.

We have a good agreement. We are following it. We have a process. We are in discussions with the Afghan government. It is doing an investigation there and will keep us informed.

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ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE

Ms. Bonnie Brown (Oakville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, extremely disturbing video footage has been released in the case of the man tragically killed by a taser in the Vancouver International Airport last month.

Canadians want answers now before more lives are lost.

Is it standard operating procedure for the RCMP to use tasers when there is no obvious physical threat?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, any of us who watched that video footage can certainly understand the shock and the grief experienced especially by the mother of the deceased individual. Our hearts go out to her.

I can also say that the RCMP is doing an investigation of this and the chair of the Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP is also doing an investigation. There is a coroner's inquest. I have also asked for a review in terms of the use of tasers. We want to make sure that things are maintained, that public safety is maintained and the answers are found on this particular issue.

Ms. Bonnie Brown (Oakville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today the Liberal critic for public safety called for public hearings into the overall use of taser weapons.

Oral Questions

We on this side of the House are taking action on this case. In the public interest, will the minister support the Liberal call for public hearings on taser use?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before the Liberal call on this, I had asked for a review related to the use of tasers.

In terms of this particular very tragic incident, we have the RCMP doing its investigation, but also, the chair of the Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP is looking into the matter with an investigation. There is a coroner's inquest going on.

There are other reviews going on relating to the use of tasers. The province of Quebec has just completed one that has valuable and helpful information. This will continue.

* * *

[Translation]

STATUS OF WOMEN

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, a study by the World Economic Forum suggests that the gender gap has an impact on the competitiveness and economy of countries. The larger the gender gap, the lower the competitiveness. According to the same report, Canada slipped in world rankings on gender equality from 14th to 18th.

In light of this, does the minister intend to act and take tangible action for women, by adopting proactive pay equity legislation for instance?

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course, the Bloc Québécois member has failed, as usual, to mention the following facts. We did look at the report she is referring to and we are continuing to examine it, but it is important to understand that Canada has not regressed. It is simply that other countries have taken more proactive measures.

That said, the same report states that Canada has been maintaining good practices to promote gender equality in the country.

• (1455)

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the former heritage minister ignored advice from her own officials, cautioning against changing the objectives and funding criteria with respect to the Status of Women program, and we know what disastrous results that has had.

Does the current minister intend to be more receptive to advice not only from her own officials but also from organizations like the World Economic Forum, women's groups and all the opposition parties, which are telling her that she is on the wrong track?

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would just like to point out to my colleague from the Bloc that her microphone is working.

Of course, since August, I have met with many groups, and women's groups in particular. Our government has done right by women, increasing by 42% the program budget for Status of Women Canada. Why? Because we are results oriented.

The fact of the matter is that, scream as she may, the Bloc Québécois member will never be able to get anything for the women of Canada.

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[English]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Ms. Tina Keeper (Churchill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is unacceptable that a government with a \$14 billion surplus is pilfering the money set aside to compensate victims of Indian residential schools so that it can cover the costs of other programs.

This is an insult to the survivors, as the government has already missed the deadline for the payments.

The government claimed that the funds came from reduced operating costs from the Indian residential schools trust. How can the government claim that the operating cost requirements have been reduced when there is a backlog of survivors waiting for compensation?

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): I am assuming, Mr. Speaker, that the member just came into the House and the standing ovation we heard is for listening hard.

We answered this question earlier. The \$82 million that was in question in the newspaper article has already been spent as an advance payment to seniors, former residential school students. That money has already been sent out. The full \$1.9 billion that this government has negotiated with aboriginal people will be sent out. There have been no cutbacks whatsoever.

Aboriginal people deserve this settlement. Our government has settled with them. It is time to get on with making the payments to these students.

* * *

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last spring the Leader of the Opposition displayed just how out of touch his economic policy is for the 21st century. The policies that the shortsighted leader is proposing have not been in vogue since bell-bottoms and shag carpet. He is playing politics with Canada's economy by calling for a moratorium on foreign investment.

Could the Minister of Industry share with the House what the government is doing on foreign investment/state-owned enterprises and what are the findings of a 10 year study done by Statistics Canada?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): As we know, Mr. Speaker, foreign investment is very important to Canada. This government appreciates that, which is why we are continuing to ensure that Canada remains an attractive place to invest.

Foreign investment brings many benefits. In particular, the Statistics Canada report shows that foreign companies operating in Canada are more productive. They pay higher wages. They create more jobs. All of this contributes to research and development. It is all good news for Canada.

The recently appointed competition policy review panel, the so-called Red Wilson panel, will be further examining ways that we can increase our competitiveness in the global economy. I look forward to receiving its work.

* * *

ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE

Ms. Penny Priddy (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a man about to begin a new life in Canada died after a taser gun was used on him by the RCMP in the Vancouver International Airport. Graphic video of the incident now haunts Canadians and the screams of a dying man echo throughout the country. It is time for answers.

What directives have been issued to the RCMP relating to the operational use of tasers in the aftermath of this horrible death and what is the status of the officers involved in this case?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this tragic incident is being pursued on a number of levels. The RCMP, of course, is doing an investigation, and that is with members of other police forces, not just the RCMP. There is also the complaints commissioner, who is looking into the matter in terms of complaints against the RCMP. There is a coroner's inquest that is ongoing. I have asked for a review related to the use of tasers.

This is a tragic and grievous incident. We want to find out answers that can prevent these things from happening in the future.

• (1500)

Ms. Penny Priddy (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it makes no sense that the RCMP is investigating itself, which it really is in this incident.

Has the government not learned lessons from the RCMP pension scandal, the Arar affair or the Ian Bush case?

It is simple. The RCMP is also in a conflict of interest in this case and therefore it should immediately be removed from the investigation, hand over all relevant materials to the Vancouver police and let this investigation be run by another police force. Will the minister order that?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there are a number of investigations that are ongoing in this particular matter. The policy of a police force investigating something that has happened internally is fairly common. As a matter of fact, it is not just the RCMP that is involved in that, but a number of other police jurisdictions.

There is the coroner's inquest. There is my request related to the taser use and also the Commission for Complaints Against the RCMP.

I might add that we also have the Brown task force in place, which is due to report by the end of this year. We believe there are going to be recommendations there in terms of new approaches to help police do investigations.

Oral Questions

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minister's answer, which he read twice from his blue sheet, as to why he took millions of dollars from residential school survivors just does not wash. Many, many payments are late. The minister should be cleaning up this mess. If the government were serious about compensation for residential school survivors, he would not be touching that money before all the survivors were paid.

This is an appalling insult to the survivors who are still waiting for their compensation. Will the minister put the money back where it belongs and apologize to the survivors today?

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member listens kind of like his leader.

I will tell him what: these payments are late, about 10 years late. That is why this government, as soon as we could, made an arrangement with first nations. We worked closely with the Assembly of First Nations. We have come to an agreement. We have come to the \$1.9 billion figure working with the AFN and the courts.

The full \$1.9 billion will be sent to residential school students. The \$82 million in question has already gone out before all the rest because we wanted to get that money out to seniors as quickly as we could. All of that money is for those students.

* * *

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week the Minister of the Environment returned to Hamilton Harbour-Burlington Bay and demonstrated our government's commitment to action on cleaning up environmental hot spots in the Great Lakes by announcing \$30 million for the Hamilton Harbour.

The mayor of Hamilton, eternally grateful to the Minister of the Environment, said to him, "You have made a fundamental and significant difference in the way this city is going to develop".

Can the Minister of the Environment tell this House how this \$30 million will help the Hamilton and Burlington area?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me say first that I am surprised at this question.

There were two problems and there were two things that helped clean up the Hamilton Harbour Randle Reef. Those two things are the member for Burlington and the member for Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale. Those two members fought hard to get the money to clean up Randle Reef, one of the most contaminated sites in this country.

The Liberals had their chance to help Hamilton, but this government is cleaning up Randle Reef. This will lead to a better quality of life for people in Hamilton, a redevelopment of the Hamilton shoreline, and expanded port facilities. It is one more example of where this government is getting the job done.

*Business of the House***MAHER ARAR**

Mr. Bill Casey (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, a few months ago I asked the Minister of Public Safety about ongoing investigations into the leaks and false information that resulted in Maher Arar being imprisoned for a year. Could the minister advise us if there is any progress in any of these investigations and does he think that anyone will be held accountable in the end?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as one of many examples of how this government moves quickly in situations like this, all of the recommendations of the O'Connor report were put into place. An apology was given and also compensation, which was satisfying to Mr. Arar.

None of that was done by the people opposite even though that entire situation took place under their watch. We continue, as a matter of fact, to appeal on behalf of Mr. Arar with our counterparts in the United States regarding the removal of his name from their cautionary list in the United States.

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• (1505)

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the Ladies Gallery of the recipients of the 2008 National Aboriginal Achievement Awards.

They are as follows: Norval Morrisseau, Boyd Wesley Benjamin, Shirley Cheechoo, Jim Boucher, Hubert Skye, Marie Battiste, Elizabeth Penashue, Jeff Redaig, David Hahwegahbow, Paul Andrew, Joe Handley, Sylvia Maracle, Reggie Leach and Bernard McCue.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: I invite all hon. members to meet the recipients at a reception at 3:15 p.m. in room 216.

It being Thursday, I believe the opposition House leader, the member for Wascana, has a question.

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BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the government House leader would indicate his proposed work program through to the end of next week.

He has indicated informally to House leaders what he intends to pursue on Monday and Tuesday of next week, but he has not provided any further detail beyond that. I wonder if he could inform the House of his intentions.

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as you know, this week is strengthening the federation through democratic reform week.

[*Translation*]

We began the week by debating the bill on visual identification of electors and we hope to examine the bill on rural electors without a municipal address shortly.

Today we have concluded debate at second reading on the first bill to enhance the electoral process and improve the integrity of the electoral system and we hope to conclude debate on the second bill as well.

[*English*]

Next, I am pleased to say that we will begin debate on our bills to make the Senate more democratic and accountable. We will begin with the debate on the future of the Senate by discussing our bill to limit the terms of senators. Our bill will put an end to the comfortable 45 year terms for senators, limiting those terms to eight years.

I hope the Liberals in the House do not follow the lead of their colleagues in the Senate who did everything they could to block this bill, especially since the Liberal leader is on the record numerous times supporting term limits for senators.

After concluding debate on our term limits bill, we will start debate on our bill to ask Canadians who should represent them in the Senate. For the first time ever, Canadians across Canada will have a direct say in who should represent them in the Senate.

In a serious effort to work with the opposition, we will be seeking to send this bill to committee before second reading. This will allow a wider consideration of the bill and amendments at committee.

Next week will be safer communities through tackling crime week. We will start on Monday by debating our security certificates bill. While we expect vigorous debate on this bill, we hope that all parties will act in a responsible, reasonable way, mindful of the advice that the Supreme Court has given in this matter.

In addition, we will also be welcoming back to the House our bill to make our streets and communities safer by tackling violent crime. Pursuant to a special order, our tackling violent crime bill will be reported back to the House by Friday of next week.

Other bills addressing important changes needed to make our streets and communities safer will be introduced next week.

[*Translation*]

Finally, the Minister of Finance will continue to ensure effective economic leadership by presenting a bill to implement the measures in budget 2007. This bill will seek to implement the \$60 billion tax cuts promised in the economic statement, which also proposes reducing the GST to 5%. We will begin debate on this important bill on Wednesday.

[*English*]

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as part of the Thursday question, I would like an assurance from the government House leader that there will be adequate time for the committees to study the estimates, and the estimates will not be brought back to the House that will preclude the committees from doing that work, because there has been some suggestion that might happen.

The supply cycle goes to December 10, but we would like an assurance that the committees will be able to go through the estimates before the main supplementary estimates are brought back to the House.

Government Orders

• (1510)

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, the supply period is set out clearly in the Standing Orders. The last supply day will be sometime between December 3 and December 10. It is our intention to proceed sometime in accordance with the Standing Orders with the last supply day in that period.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Mr. Speaker, in view of the designation which the government House leader has just made that next week will be a resumption of its tackling crime initiative and will designate the week as a week to tackle crime, I wonder if the government would consider a take note debate at some point next week with respect to the Mulroney-Schreiber matter?

The Speaker: I think that discussions about such debates are normally held between the House leaders and done by agreement. I am sure the House leaders, when they have their weekly meeting, will discuss whether they want to have this kind of debate and will settle the matter. It does not need to be the subject of questions in the House, I suspect.

I have not been to a House leaders meeting in years. I am not an expert on this matter, but I believe those things are frequently settled there and that is just as well.

* * *

[Translation]

CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-18, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (verification of residence), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to this bill to amend the Canada Elections Act with regard to verification of residence.

Here is the problem, more or less. Elections Canada recently revealed that 1 million Canadians do not have a proper residential address under the terms of the original legislation. In other words, they do not have an address with a street number and a street name.

This is a reality both in Quebec and Canada. We have big cities, but we also have, numerically speaking, a large number of rural communities. Rural addresses quite often consist of post office box numbers or rural route numbers. For example, an address might include the name of the person, "Rural Route 1", and the name of the municipality. We know that in most cases in rural areas, mail carriers deliver the mail to mailboxes along the roadside. Such is the case in my riding on Île d'Orléans, in Côte-de-Beaupré and in Charlevoix, where farms are very large. This makes mail delivery quite challenging.

In addition, Elections Canada realized that the addresses of residents of aboriginal reserves often consist of nothing but the name of the reserve. In my riding, there is a very dynamic aboriginal community, the Innu of Essipit. I am proud to salute the leadership of grand chief Denis Ross, as well as all of the band council and the negotiating team. In some aboriginal communities, then, the address consists solely of the name of the person and the name of the reserve.

We can imagine that makes the process of identification somewhat complicated.

Worse still, those people could not appeal to another voter in the same polling division to vouch for them because most of the voters would not have the documents required to prove the address of their residence.

The problem is as follows. If you live in a township and your address is just "Rural Route 1", it is very likely that the people who know you best or most intimately are your neighbours, and it could well be that those neighbours are your relatives. So, if your sister, your brother or sister-in-law lives on the same rural route as you, they have the same problem of identification. Their own address is incomplete for the purposes of Elections Canada. This measure has the same goal of improving the conditions for identification of voters.

According to Elections Canada, there are 1,012,989 voters, that is 4.4% of eligible voters in Canada, who do not have a residential address that meets the requirements of the Elections Act as amended. The situation is very disquieting. What is more, Elections Canada tells us that 80% of the residents of an area such as Nunavut do not have a personal address.

There are statistics for Saskatchewan, Ontario and for Newfoundland and Labrador. In Quebec, it is a matter of 15,836 voters or 27/100 of 1%, or more than 0.25% who could be facing the same problem.

Through Bill C-18, which are now debating, the government is amending the Canada Elections Act to provide more flexibility in the regulations concerning the verification of residence in the case of voters who live in areas where the municipal address appearing on a piece of identification consists of a postal box, general delivery or rural route.

• (1515)

This bill provides that where the address indicated on the items of identification presented does not establish the residence of the voter but is consistent with the corresponding information on the voters list, the residence of the voter is deemed to have been established.

For example, a voter whose piece of identity contains an address consisting only of the rural route could establish his residence if that postal address matches the information recorded on the voters list.

The bill also provides that in case of doubt the deputy returning officer, the poll clerk, a candidate or candidate's representative could ask the voter to take the prescribed oath if there is any doubt in the opinion of the election officials.

The Bloc Québécois supports the principle of the bill because we believe it is necessary to correct the law to avoid having 1 million Canadians deprived of their right to vote. Even though, numerically speaking, we are talking about a smaller number compared to other communities and other provinces, I believe that those 15,836 voters in Quebec also have the right to exercise their right to vote. Not amending the act would amount to depriving them of their right to vote, and voting is a democratic exercise in which we elect the representatives who will speak for us in Ottawa.

Government Orders

We are of the opinion that the NDP proposal to grant the right to vote to every voter who swears an oath is unacceptable. This proposal was already rejected by the three other political parties when Bill C-31 was studied in the previous session of this Parliament.

We believe that it is reasonable to require at least one piece of photo ID, if available, to verify the identity of voters and to ensure the integrity of the electoral system. There must not be any ambiguity: the NDP proposal could result in some fraud. The NDP proposal runs counter to the principles of identification required to vote in a general election or a byelection.

We know that the NDP is criticizing this bill because it believes it will not resolve all the problems created last spring by Bill C-31. We recall the discussions of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs where the NDP pointed out the situation of homeless people. I wish to reiterate what I said at that time: our party is not oblivious to the situation of the homeless. On the contrary, it is proof that despite economic prosperity, despite the fact that the dollar has reached its highest value in 30 years, there is the reality that there are poor people and homeless people in Canada and Quebec.

The problem for the homeless is that they do not always have an identification card. Yet, they must be able find someone to vouch for them and prove their identity. To adopt the NDP position would be to ensure that anyone at all could vote. We cannot support that position.

On the Liberal side, the member for Wascana, also the House leader of the official opposition, a Liberal member from Saskatchewan, is calling for this problem to be solved as quickly as possible.

In closing, I want to reiterate that the Bloc Québécois is in favour of this bill and that this problem is not new to us, even though it has received a lot of media attention lately. On December 7, 2006, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, former Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, appeared before our Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and warned parliamentarians about the address problem.

● (1520)

I will close my presentation by citing Mr. Kingsley:

The requirement to prove residence presents a significant challenge. It is worth noting that in Quebec, which is the only province requiring ID at the polls, electors only need to prove their identity, not their residence. ... As well, the chief electoral officers of other Canadian jurisdictions have pointed out that in many rural and northern areas of the country, especially west of Ontario, the address on the driver's licence is not the residential address but the postal address.

In closing, we believe that this bill will be carefully examined by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. I will say again that the Bloc Québécois is in favour of the principle of this bill.

[*English*]

Ms. Catherine Bell (Vancouver Island North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure today to speak to Bill C-18 recently introduced into the House of Commons in an effort to fix a hastily adopted bill, Bill C-31, from the last session of Parliament.

I say hastily because I know the committee heard from many witnesses. They heard from Elections Canada, first nations, students, homeless advocates and the members of the committee, including the NDP member for Ottawa Centre, who was the critic at the time.

I know a lot of issues were raised on Bill C-31. Unfortunately, some of the flaws that were pointed out were not addressed. They were overruled by the members of the committee.

Today we are trying to fix a problem created by the Conservative government. The problem is the new stringent regulations, as set out in Bill C-31, on the cards to prove one's identity ultimately will lead to the disenfranchisement of over a million voters, as we have heard. This was pointed out by Elections Canada after the fact. Basically that has forced the government to come up with this new bill to try to undo the damage.

Under the new regulations of Bill C-18 being considered today, voting will still be more difficult for many cross-sections of Canadians, including people with rural addresses.

That is why I am here today to speak to the bill. I represent a riding that is probably 50% rural. We have a lot of small towns and a couple of large centres that get home delivery, but most of our communities get rural mail delivery. It is for them that I am worried.

I also have to include myself in that group of people because I live in a small town. I have a box number. Fortunately for me, my residential address is also on my driver's licence, as well as my box number. If that were not the case, I might find myself on election day unable to vote, or having to prove who I am.

In areas of Courtenay, where there is rural mail delivery, many people living on small farms and on lots outside of the city limits. They do not have home delivery. These people get their mail at the side of the road in a box, and it is an RR number. It has been like that for many years and a lot of the people have lived there for many years. This includes the area of Royston, which is just south of Courtenay where my aunt lives.

She has been in that place for over 50 years. She just turned 80 years old. She has always lived in the same place. She may find herself at the polling station unable to vote because she does not drive. She does not have a driver's licence with a picture ID on it and probably could not prove who she was. All her neighbours and the people who she knows would be unable to vouch for her because they might find themselves in the same predicament without the ability to verify who they are.

Also areas of Comox and outer areas of that town do not get home delivery. Up in the Lazo area, many people living in the little communities of Merville, Black Creek and Oyster River may be disenfranchised from their vote. Again, these people do not get their mail delivered to a box in a central post office. Because of what happened with Canada Post over a number of years, we have found that our mail is delivered to small community grocery stores, gas stations or other places where people have to pick up their mail. The mail does not come to their residences, so they usually have a rural mail delivery address or a box number in those places. Many people are going to find they have a problem.

Government Orders

• (1525)

I spoke a little about box numbers. Most of the communities in my riding, for example, Cumberland, Gold River, Sayward, Tahsis, Port McNeil, Port Hardy and Port Alice, Zeballos, have very small post offices. They are a long way from Ottawa and the larger geographical centres of British Columbia. People in these small towns rely on the post offices as the place to get their mail. Pretty well everyone's mail is delivered to a post office box. Many people live on roads that may not even have a name or a sign and their residence address would not be listed.

The other interesting thing is that there are a lot of little islands, Hornby, Denman, Quadra, Cortes, Alert Bay and Sointula, all those little islands we travel to and from. The people who live on those islands also get their mail delivered to a box at the local post office which in many instances is in the local community grocery store. These people may also find themselves disenfranchised.

That is a lot of communities, in fact most of the communities in my riding. There are only two main communities where people would get their mail delivered to their home and their home address would be on their card. We are concerned about what might happen with the people in the small communities.

The other thing I have to highlight is all the first nations communities in my riding and there are a lot of them, including places like Owikeno, Kingcome Inlet and up in Simoom Sound. These places are very remote. People do not get their mail delivered to a post office box or to their home. Their addresses are bag number such and such in the closest town and the mail is flown in on small airplanes or taken in by boat whenever the weather is good. That is how they get their mail. If they were issued a card that said bag number such and such, or whatever, obviously they do not live in a bag, they live in a beautiful community up the coast, but they could find themselves disenfranchised.

It is already hard enough for some people in our smaller communities and especially first nations because until recently they did not even have polling places on reserve, so they were feeling disenfranchised that way as well.

We are trying to find more opportunities to increase the vote among first nations people in our communities. I know in the last election we worked very hard with Elections Canada to make sure that there were polls on reserves so that people would have an opportunity to vote where they live. That is so important.

Some people in our rural communities have to travel quite a distance to exercise their franchise. We take it for granted when we live in a larger centre, in that we can just take a few minutes to go to our polling station and vote. We need to make sure there are more opportunities to do that, not less.

Also, I talked about homeless people and transient populations. My colleague, the member for Vancouver East, spoke passionately about how we would be disenfranchising many of those people in the inner cities who live in shelters or who are homeless. There were some provisions made to identify them and to make sure that they were not left out.

In my community we do not have big shelters. We have a couple of small ones, but we also have many homeless people in my riding. Many of these people are couch surfing. They are living in cars. There are families who are living at campsites. There are people who are double bunking, a couple of different families living together trying to make ends meet, trying to find suitable housing.

I do not know what will happen to those people if they have no address at all and they cannot prove where they are living. It is going to be really difficult for them at voting time. It is something that we should have addressed before.

• (1530)

At committee we also heard from students who were living away from home. Aboriginal representatives who came to committee brought up some of the flaws that were ignored at the time. As I said, here we are debating a bill that fixes another bill that was rushed through the House.

The NDP critic at the time who worked on the committee made presentations to our caucus. We understood the problems. We were the only party to vote against Bill C-31 at the time.

It is very unfair that all the groups that I just mentioned, aboriginals, students, rural residents, people who live in small towns, will have to jump through hoops in order to carry out their democratic right and civic duty to cast a ballot.

Constituents have called me to ask what is going on with respect to paragraph 3, proof of identity, in Bill C-18. They will have to provide proof of identity and residence. If a person cannot prove his or her residence, then the person may lose his or her franchise to vote. That is a problem. That is basically what brings us here today.

The provisions were introduced in order to combat voter fraud that allegedly was taking place in Canada. However, no meaningful evidence has been put forth to prove that fraud was occurring in any systematic or widespread way.

My colleague from Ottawa Centre mentioned that candidate fraud is a bigger problem than voter fraud, with the floor crossing that goes on. A candidate representing a certain party will get elected. People commit to a certain candidate. They work hard for that candidate to make sure that the candidate is elected and when that person gets to the House of Commons, that person might cross the floor to another party. That act in itself is what turns off a lot of voters. It is a shame that these things are allowed to happen in this House.

I also believe that the objective of stamping out voter fraud is an honourable one, but unfortunately, it is being pursued at too high a price under these bills. It basically alienates many honest Canadians and disenfranchises them from their opportunity to vote. It is too high a price to pay for something that really is not a huge problem in the first place. The most important thing is for Canadians to have easy and open access to the ballot.

Government Orders

I put forward a motion on electoral reform because I wanted to hear from more Canadians. More Canadians deserve an opportunity to vote and their vote should count. I wanted to hear from Canadians to find out how we could change and enhance our electoral system with proportional representation, but unfortunately that motion was hijacked by the procedure and House affairs committee. It basically turned into a process where the government could hear about Senate reform. I heard from people who attended the focus groups that came out of that procedure. The whole agenda was pretty much taken up with talk about Senate reform. There was very little talk about electoral reform.

• (1535)

That is sad because I know that in the province of British Columbia where I come from, electoral reform is something that a lot of people wanted. When we had our referendum in 2005, it did not pass, but it did not lose by much either. We had over 50%. Unfortunately, the way it was set out it had to have 60%, but 57% is more than 50% plus one. That is what we need to have a majority in this House. I think a majority of British Columbians did want some sort of change in our electoral process.

Back to the bill at hand, the NDP critic for democratic reform, the member for Timmins—James Bay, is taking an active role at the committee. Other NDP MPs are rising in this House to ensure that the rights of all Canadians are protected at the ballot box.

My colleague from Timmins—James Bay also is in jeopardy of losing his vote. There was an article a number of weeks ago in the paper about that. His driver's licence has a very strange address. That is how things are done in his riding. It does not list his residence, but only lists the number of a road. He is willing, as I and others are, to jump through the procedural hoops that the government has placed before us to make sure that we get to vote on election day.

I do not have to ask how many of my constituents would be willing to find someone to go to the polling station with them to declare that they are who they say they are. Seniors, people with disabilities, young people who are voting for the first time, are they going to show up at the ballot box with the people necessary to prove who they are, or will they walk away? I think most people would say, "Forget it. This is too much trouble. Why bother". Such a procedure is going to turn people away from the voting process. This is something that we ought not to do. We should be encouraging people to get out and vote, not making it more difficult for them. We should not be setting up roadblocks.

Already voter turnout is too low. I think that voter turnout hovers at around 65%. That is quite shameful. It means that members were elected to the House with the support of 65% of the population, and the percentage of the vote that we received makes it even smaller. That is something we need to address in this country. Again, that could be addressed through changing our electoral system.

I am proud to say that only the NDP caucus stood up in opposition to the original bill when it was being expedited through the House last spring. The Conservative Party introduced this troubling legislation and both the Bloc and the Liberals got on board on the condition that all voters' birthdates would be included in the voters list that is provided to the political parties. My colleague from Ottawa Centre fought hard against these provisions, but he was

ultimately outnumbered at the committee where these amendments were made.

It is unfortunate that we are here speaking to Bill C-18. Both it and Bill C-31 threaten the very foundation of democracy and the rights of citizens that Canadians hold so dear.

I know that the NDP democratic reform critic will do all he can to ensure that fair amendments to this bill are adopted so that the right of all Canadians on election day will be protected.

I thank the House for the opportunity to speak to Bill C-18 and to put my party's point of view forward.

• (1540)

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that not all members can attend all committees, as there are many committees. I know the hon. member has her own committees and is not on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. I would request that she check the minutes because at no time did the NDP raise the issue of these riding addresses.

In fact, the NDP brought forward a number of witnesses from a number of organizations who were concerned, as they should have been, with how homeless people would have the right to vote. The committee grappled with the issue at great lengths.

No one, including the folks from Elections Canada, the witnesses, the members of Parliament who were at the committee or the Senate, saw the rural address issue, and here it is. Nobody from the NDP raised this issue. They missed it completely, as did everybody else.

I want the member to be correct on her facts, and perhaps I could lend her some research assistance for her next speech.

The committee grappled with fraud and the integrity of the system. We heard stories from witnesses, and again I can help the member get the research, where people would phone in to radio stations to register their votes. We heard situations where dead people voted. We heard situations where there was a 150% turnout at some of the polls. Therefore, the fact that nobody has been charged by Elections Canada does not, in itself, preclude that there may have been fraud. It is balancing the integrity of the Canadian voting system.

Here we have a rural address problem for which we have come up with a solution. I just want to point out that the NDP provided no solution.

However, we did grapple very hard and very long to ensure homeless people were able to exercise their right to vote, despite the fact that evidence showed that in one area where there were an estimated 600 homeless people, 1,800 votes were cast by those homeless people. Therefore, the suggestion is that they voted three times.

Recently we have had comments from the NDP that to add extra voting days and give Canadians more choice when they vote would ultimately, questionably, cost a little bit of money. It has been suggested that it would increase it moderately. The NDP's comments now are that it would not be worth the expense.

Government Orders

Could the member tell us at what point we balance the integrity of the system, making sure that people who have a right to vote do vote and nobody else, not people who are vacationing in Canada and not my in-laws who perhaps are not citizens of the country? How do we protect that? How does she answer the question that we must do everything for the homeless, and I agree we must, but not anybody else because it is too expensive?

• (1545)

Ms. Catherine Bell: Mr. Speaker, I am not quite sure what the hon. member was suggesting with his last comment but I will try to answer some of his questions. If he had listened carefully to my remarks, he would not have heard me say that the NDP raised the issue of rural addresses.

I mentioned that because, from what I understand, it was the first nations people who raised that issue at the committee. However, it does not really matter at the end of the day who raised it. I do not know why we need to play a blame game. We are raising it now and it is before this House. Suffice it to say that the NDP voted against Bill C-31 and we were the only party to do so, for many reasons.

The NDP did provide solutions, such as providing a statutory declaration for voters so that they could declare themselves when voting.

With regard to the member's point on more voting days, I do not hear too many people asking for more days to vote. We have advance polls that have been extended over the years, and that is great.

I do hear from a lot of my constituents and Canadians all across this country, through petitions and other things, that they want their vote to actually count at the end of the day. They are looking for changes to our electoral system and what they really want is for their vote to count at the end of the day.

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Vancouver Island North for her intervention in the debate today and pointing out the great irony of Bill C-31, a bill that purportedly was intended to deal with the question of voter fraud, even though there is not a high level of voter fraud. No one claimed that voter fraud was rampant in Canada. Again, it seemed like an issue that was not really high on the list of issues.

Although we all want a voting system that has integrity, the question of voter fraud was not something that seemed to be rampant in Canada. We had this legislation in the last session of Parliament to purportedly deal with this problem. What it did cause was the disenfranchisement of almost a million Canadians. I really appreciate that she has taken the time to outline how that affects people, particularly in the small and rural communities in her riding on the north part of Vancouver Island.

I know this has been an area of particular concern to my colleague because she has been very active on the whole question of democratic reform and proposing significant measures. While I appreciate her comments directly on this legislation, I wonder if she could elaborate on some of her broader concerns about democratic and electoral reform in Canada, those which are not dealt with in this

legislation but would be important issues for Parliament to deal with and look at in the future.

• (1550)

Ms. Catherine Bell: Mr. Speaker, yes, I had the opportunity to put forward a private member's bill in the last session and the one I chose was electoral reform. I chose electoral reform because it is something that is fundamental to how members are elected.

Many British Columbians went through a process of meetings and discussions over a period of a year. We made presentations to a committee that was struck by the provincial government to talk about electoral reform. People began to understand that there were problems with our electoral system and they wanted to make changes. Come election day, when the referendum was on the ballot, after the votes were counted we found that 57% of British Columbians wanted to change the voting system.

I know the voting system that was put forward by the provincial government was not necessarily the system that everyone wanted, but because 57% of people voted for it tells me that they want some sort of a change. When we have that many people in my province wanting to see a change in their voting system, it is significant, and that translates federally as well.

I know Ontario just went through the same kind of process and the percentage was not as high but I think it was a different system. Ontario did not have the same kind of citizens assembly that B.C. had, where people were able to learn about the changes. Sometimes all it takes is educating people.

In the motion I put forward, I wanted to ask Canadians how they would like to see their voting system changed. I received a lot of letters and petitions from people all across the country agreeing that we should have some kind of debate in this country, a citizens assembly that would reach out to the grassroots and talk to Canadians, not the sham of a process that we had with one meeting in each province to basically talk about Senate reform.

That is something that would have changed the look of Parliament. It would have opened up the doors to people, especially young people who do not vote in great numbers. That is one of the least represented demographics at voting time. If we had some kind of system where people felt their votes actually counted, they might be more willing to participate.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a very short intervention to make a couple of points for people to consider.

First, I would like to thank all the parties for working together to bring forward Bill C-18, verification of residence of voters, so quickly, particularly on behalf of people in the north because inappropriate wording or an inadvertent mistake would have disenfranchised a lot of northerners because of their addresses. I used to have an address like RR 1, Site 2, Comp. 3. Other people have box numbers. Most northerners do not have a verified street address.

Government Orders

I express appreciation to all members of Parliament and all parties for getting this technical change through quickly. A large percentage of the people in the rural areas of Canada in particular, and I will speak for rural areas being the chair of the rural caucus, would have had difficulty voting, technically, under the definitions and would have needed special provisions. These are very warranted changes.

After reading the amendments, I am not positive that the issue of residential street addresses has been addressed. I just want to make sure that the voting rights of certain people in relation to their residential street address are protected. One example would be military personnel who are away. Hopefully, this provision would allow them, as long as they have the proper identification, to vote in the riding that they have chosen, as has occurred in the past.

Similarly, in places like my riding, a number of people, especially seniors, go south for a portion of the winter and therefore end up having to vote on occasion from down there as, of course, elections are seldom in the summer. Once again, I am assuming that if the residential address that is on the voters list is the same as the address on their identification they would have no trouble voting. However, I want to make sure that the people on the committee who are investigating this in line by line detail make sure those people are protected.

The final category of people in similar situations are students. As there are no universities north of 60, in the northern half of the country, people who go to universities in the south are often there on federal voting day. So once again, I am assuming that if they are on the voters list, as per this act, Bill C-18, and their identification matches the information on the voters list they would be able to vote. I would like the committee to confirm that in its deliberations.

I have one other item I want to bring forward. If there is a member of committee in the House perhaps he or she could just answer this question for me during questions and comments. What is the number of people a person can vouch for? In my reading of Bill C-18, I do not see any conditions on that. There may be conditions back in the original act that were not amended. I am thinking of particularly small polls where there may be a number of people in the situation where they need people to vouch for them and there may not be enough of those eligible voters to swear in those people who are not on the voters list.

Perhaps someone could clarify for me the number of people an eligible voter can vouch for under these new amendments.

I again thank everyone. We will certainly be doing everything we can to get this through as quickly as possible because everyone in Parliament agrees that this is a necessary amendment so that no one is disenfranchised, although the chief electoral officer would never let that happen because he has the flexibility to make sure everyone can vote anyway. However, it should be done properly.

I congratulate all members in the House for making these corrections as quickly as possible.

• (1555)

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member. He has done a lot of work and has been very concerned about this issue, as all of us are, and he quite rightly

points out that all parties appear to be cooperating and not playing games to get this through.

The member's comments about folks who travel is a very good one because a lot of folks in my riding too when the weather gets bad, head down to Florida. We want to ensure that wherever Canadians are in the world at the time of an election, that they actually have every availability to them to express their franchise to vote. The member should know that special ballots, mail-in ballots, allow folks that are in another country to go to the Canadian embassy and vote there. Those ballots can be sent home as our troops have done, et cetera. So none of those are affected by this legislation.

The member may not be familiar with the most current piece of legislation whereby the government wants to ensure that every opportunity is provided for Canadians to vote and vote with integrity within the system. We have added an extra couple of days where Canadians can vote. That would help some of the folks in my riding who perhaps might be in Florida on the day of the election. They can mail in their ballots as I have said in a special ballot situation, but it is convenient for Canadians to have these extra voting days.

I wonder if the member would not mind to comment on his intentions to support the other legislation that I am sure would help folks in his riding too by having a couple of extra couple of options. I suspect in the member's riding that having an extra couple of days might be a great idea because I know his riding is very large and that would help folks to have a few extra days. Would he support that legislation?

• (1600)

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Mr. Speaker, two points. First of all, in reference to the students and people who travel south and the military, I know about special ballots and everything will be there to vote in the same way. My question was regarding the requirement for a street address and whether that would negatively affect that procedure, would they now need to have a street address where they did not before? Hopefully that is covered by the amendments in Bill C-18.

In relation to the extra voting days, because people can vote by special ballot the day the writ is dropped, I am certainly in favour of having a system that is very flexible with good advance polling days because one or two days does not always help my constituents. As the member said, I have a huge riding and voters could easily be outside their poll and still in the riding, but impossible to get there. It is five or six hours in three directions to get back to my riding and a lot of people would not do that to vote, especially driving in minus 40°. As we discussed earlier, a lot of them travel outside the territory. They often go south for reasons of work, to visit family or other reasons so that one day or two days is not necessarily enough. There needs to be flexibility over the whole system.

Government Orders

There is one other problem that arises, and hopefully the committee will look at this. I was in a hospital last election day visiting people who were sick and a couple of people were there who had come from out of town for a couple of hours to visit people in emergency. They could not vote because people have to be at their poll to vote. That is disenfranchising people and hopefully that problem can be addressed in the future.

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member will know that yesterday in northern Canada a major report on women and homelessness was released, it is entitled, “You Just Blink and It Can Happen”. It talked about the very serious situation that faces women who are homeless in Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

One of the problems that we know existed with the legislation that was passed in the first session of this Parliament, Bill C-31, was that it did not go out of its way to assist people who were homeless to register and vote in elections.

Since the bill that we are currently debating tries to fix one of the glaring problems created by the previous legislation, which is the disenfranchisement of rural voters, I wonder if the member might comment on how the legislation that we are debating now does anything to ensure that homeless people will be able to vote in federal elections. For instance, it does not allow for statutory declarations. It does not allow for someone to vouch for more than one person at a poll.

For example, if a woman finds herself in a transition shelter, it would not allow the person who operates that shelter to vouch for all the women who happen to be living at that place at the time of a federal election. The person who vouches also has to be someone who is on the voters list in that poll, so it is a very limited possibility for ensuring that those people who are homeless or in some kind of a transition at that moment are able to vote.

I wonder if the member might comment in light of this very disturbing report that came out yesterday on women's homelessness in the north.

• (1605)

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for that question because it is something I love to talk about as it was a very distressing report.

I raised the question about homelessness during the original debate, urging the committee to make sure that as much as possible was done there. It is also the reason I asked the question, which has not been answered yet, that the member raised about the number of persons an eligible elector can vouch for. We have to make sure that people in those situations can vote and I know the committee is looking at that.

I was delighted to be present for the release of the report, having read the executive summary, and to be there with the Liberal critic for women's issues. We were two MPs who attended the release yesterday. It contains horrific stories which, living in the north, I see all the time.

I was delighted that a number of things requested in the report were in the Liberal leader's anti-poverty plan. For instance, with regard to poverty for children, the Liberals would make the non-

refundable tax credit refundable so that the poorest of poor could be helped by that tax credit. It does not help them at all now because if they do not pay taxes, they cannot receive the credit.

Also, we would expand the national child tax benefit which has been a widely acclaimed program in Canada, but we would make it even bigger and better.

We would also do three things to help seniors, which are part of poverty and homelessness in the north. First, we would increase the old age supplement, which goes to the poorest of poor; second, we would try to ensure that if one spouse dies, the other does not get dragged, for bureaucratic reasons, below the poverty line; and third, we would try to reward people who wanted to go back to work.

We would also work with other orders of government on items like affordable housing, which is obviously a big need, and continue our support for homeless shelters. There are a lot of good projects in my riding, I do not know about the rest of the country, through the SCPI program. There was no shelter at all before and now there is one, but it is certainly not totally suitable for the needs of women and, as the report said, 16 to 18 year old women. There are not enough services related to substance counselling and, in particular, in local areas there is not enough legislation related to landlord and tenant acts.

I highly recommend that everyone in Parliament look at this report. It is very thick. It dealt with the homelessness and poverty of women in all three territories and the excruciating effects it can have, particularly where there are excessively cold, harsh conditions.

At 50° or 60° below, as the member who used to live in Dawson knows, people cannot be homeless and lie on the streets. They have to go somewhere and probably somewhere they should not be, such as where their children can be abused or they have to provide services they do not want to just so they can survive the night. These are horrendous conditions in the north.

Having a very wealthy country with the amount of surpluses that we have, I would highly recommend that each party look at the recommendations in the report and try to put those into their platforms.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to rise today on Bill C-18, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (verification of residence). I would like to provide a bit of background on why we are seized today with this bill. In February 2007, the House of Commons passed Bill C-31, which changed the Elections Act to reduce the chances of fraud or error by strengthening the requirements around the identification of electors.

Government Orders

As a result of these changes, Bill C-31 became more like the Quebec Election Act. It was nothing new, therefore, for us in the Bloc Québécois. Bill C-31 will be in effect in the next election campaign and came into force at the time of the last byelections in Quebec. Voters now have to present a piece of government-issued identification containing their name, photograph and home address, for example a driver's licence. Voters who do not have identification containing a photograph must supply two pieces of acceptable identification in order to establish their identity and home address.

The Chief Electoral Officer will issue a list of the acceptable pieces of identification that electors can present at polling stations. We had one during the last byelection in Quebec. The identification can range from a credit card or credit card statement to a telephone bill or any other document that makes it possible to quickly identify the elector.

Potential electors who go to a polling station without two pieces of identification will be required by law to take an oath that they are who they say they are. In addition, a person who has already met the voting requirements can vouch for them. So it is very simple. If a person does not have two pieces of identification, someone who has already voted and met the requirements and who has his or her identification can vouch for that person.

This seemed very acceptable to us. Of course, there are always exceptions to any good rule. We had to review the situation in light of the recommendations by the Chief Electoral Officer, who told us that more than 1 million Canadians do not have a home address in due form.

We can understand that in Quebec. Until 2000, I was the mayor of a small town. I was given the opportunity to be the warden of the MRC and one day the president of the Union des municipalités du Québec. I can say that in the 1980s, a number of the smallest communities in Quebec did not have street numbers, door numbers, etc. The Government of Quebec asked all these municipalities to have addresses with street numbers and door numbers. This required a major investment. People had to go through the Commission de toponymie to get street names and so forth. The effort was made in Quebec, in areas that had municipalities.

However, there are still some areas not organized in municipalities. In Quebec, there are thought to be about 15,000 people who are affected. This figure also includes people with no fixed address, the homeless and so on. According to the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, there are about 15,800 electors who do not have an address consistent with Bill C-31, passed last February.

When we look at what happened in the other provinces, such as Newfoundland and Labrador, we see that approximately 23% of voters would not be able to vote because they do not have a home address with street number. This means that they have rural addresses with only P.O. box or rural route numbers. This was the case 20 years ago in Quebec. So we can understand why other communities decided not to invest in this. In Ontario, 150,000 voters are affected and in Saskatchewan, there are 189,000. In Nunavut, approximately 80% of residences do not have individual addresses. So we can understand why this bill aims to regularize the situation and enable these people to vote.

Obviously, the proposals in Bill C-18 seem acceptable to us. In short, the bill amends the Canada Elections Act to make the rules more flexible, making it possible to verify the residence of voters living in areas where the municipal address on ID cards is a P.O. box, general delivery or rural route.

• (1610)

The bill states that if the address on the ID card provided does not establish the voter's residence, but corresponds to the information found on the voter's list, the voter's residence would be deemed established.

For example, a voter whose ID card shows only a rural route address would be able to establish his residence if that address corresponds to the information on the voter's list.

Obviously, if the voter's list shows that a person lives on rural route #2 in a particular place, and the identification shows the same address, it would be possible to make the connection and the bill would not require a street name and number as it did before. There would be enough information to make the connection.

There is also the case where one voter vouches for another. I gave an example of this earlier. Under the current act, someone who has an address and knows someone who does not have an address with a street number or does not have two pieces of identification can vouch for that person. People without addresses cannot be vouchers under the current act. Now, people who have proven to scrutineers, Elections Canada workers or the people responsible for supervising the vote that their general delivery address is the same as the address on the voter's list—and who therefore have previously exercised their right to vote—may vouch for another voter.

Clearly, these people can be allowed to vouch for voters who have no identification. The current bill keeps the references to pieces of identification, but allows rural routes in lieu of addresses with street numbers as addresses that match what appears on the voters list.

In my opinion, it is good that this bill can make things better for 15,800 voters in Quebec with no fixed address. The same problem exists in the other provinces, so the bill makes things better for the million voters the Chief Electoral Officer mentioned.

However, we have heard from members of other parties in this House. This measure must not nullify the whole principle of Bill C-31, which was introduced in the last session. We want to be able to avoid fraud by requiring two pieces of identification. We must not allow statutory declarations. What some members are trying to say is that we should go back to statutory declarations. A person simply has to take an oath to be entitled to vote. What we want is evidence, identification or someone who can vouch for someone else. Otherwise, this bill would call into question or have the opposite effect of Bill C-31, which was passed in February 2007.

Government Orders

I want Quebeckers who are watching us to know that Bill C-31 of February, 2007, is identical to the Election Act of Quebec. In Quebec, when we vote, we have to show identification. The federal legislation was much more lax. In the past, this resulted in mistakes and possibility for fraud. Quebec has always been a leader. Since René Lévesque, who overhauled the entire electoral system, political party financing and so forth, Quebec has always led the way in electoral legislation. We must applaud the Government of Canada for yet again modelling its legislation on legislation in force in Quebec and for the decisions it makes here in this House, with tremendous support from the Bloc Québécois. We are always proud to help the rest of Canada benefit from the good things in Quebec. Often, the best things come from Quebec. I am sure that the hon. member for Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean can attest to that. As a former mayor, he knows quite well that we are always leaders in Quebec, but lately with the Conservative government, we have been falling behind in forestry and the development of the manufacturing sector.

If the federal government would agree to invest in its jurisdictions in economic development, if it would agree to listen to the recommendations of the Government of Quebec, of Premier Jean Charest, who is not a sovereigntist, things would be better. Premier Charest asked the federal government to intervene and help the manufacturing and forestry sectors.

• (1615)

We saw that the Conservative government's recent policy statement, its mini-budget, offered absolutely nothing to deal with the crisis in forestry and manufacturing.

Bill C-18, which follows on Bill C-31, is a good piece of legislation. It modernizes the Elections Act and is based on legislation that has been in force in Quebec for almost a decade.

It would be nice if, in other matters such as aid programs for the forestry and industrial sectors, the Conservative government reacted to and relied on the good advice it is being given by the Bloc Québécois MPs and the Government of Quebec.

Once again, it is sad to see our colleagues from Quebec who agree to sit here, to sit at the same table as the hon. members from the rest of Canada, who do not have the same interests as Quebeckers. What can I say? They might understand, one day. There are seats available here on this side of the House for them.

That is why we always have to pay attention and be alert. After all, we are here to stand up for citizens. Bill C-18 was introduced in response to a complaint from Canada's Chief Electoral Officer, who wanted voters with no fixed street address to be allowed to vote.

The Bloc Québécois intends to stand up for their interests and supports the government in helping the Chief Electoral Officer.

When it comes to the Chief Electoral Officer, however, we always have to be very careful. When he asks for something, that is one thing, but when we do, that is another thing entirely. Let us not forget what happened during the last election campaign in Quebec, for the byelections. All of the parties in this House asked the Chief Electoral Officer not to allow people to vote with their faces covered. He did not comply with the unanimous decision of the members of this House who asked him to act in a timely and efficient manner like Quebec's chief electoral officer did.

I want to make sure this message reaches Canada's Chief Electoral Officer. This bill can help him. However, when all of the parties decide to recommend something, he should comply with that. After all, he is a public official. We want him to be neutral, but the position is a political appointment. That raises some questions. The Conservatives appointed him. They were very upset when he allowed people to vote with their faces covered. But since they were the ones who appointed him, they played it down later.

Obviously, by introducing a voter identification bill in this House, they are trying to correct one problem by creating another. The Conservatives are often conflicted like that. They want to solve the problem of veiled voters, but that means staff at polling stations will have to be women. Clearly, by solving one problem, they are creating another. That is often the case with the Conservatives. That is why they are languishing in the polls. In my opinion, they will continue to languish for some time.

Nevertheless, we hope here today to help those who do not have a fixed address. I explained this at the beginning. Something like this happened in Quebec in the 1980s. The tiniest communities did not have street names or civic numbers. That is understandable. Now, out of seven million residents in Quebec, there are only 15,000 people who do not have one. We understand that not all provinces have invested in this way. We can respect that reality, and help those people, while respecting the fact that they must produce identification.

Bill C-18 states that, even if a voter does not have a civic address, he or she must bring identification. If that identification indicates rural route number 1, without a house number, and if the voter registration indicates the same information, that is, rural route number 1, that is considered a match.

Thus, this bill would allow these people to vote. That is the aim of the bill, and we support it.

I can give an example of the identification required. A list, which can be updated for every election, was drawn up by the Chief Electoral Officer.

• (1620)

That is why it was not included directly in the bill. However, concerning ID cards, for all the voters listening here today, it could happen sooner than one might think. One never knows. There could be a federal election any time. With a minority government, any little slip up could trigger an election.

Government Orders

They need to know that the identity cards that will be accepted must include a photo and address, like a driver's licence. Otherwise, it will be necessary to produce two other pieces of identification; in particular, those with a photo but without the address, such as a health insurance card in Quebec. It could be a matter of a health insurance card, a social insurance card, a birth certificate, a driver's licence, obviously, a Canadian passport, a certificate of Indian status, Canadian citizenship certificate or citizenship card, a credit or debit card in the voter's name, a Canadian Forces identity card, a health care card, an employee identification card produced by an employer, the old age security card, a bus pass, a student card, a library card, a liquor store identity card, a card from Canadian Blood Services or Héma-Québec, a hospital card, a fishing permit, a wildlife identification card, a hunting licence, a firearms acquisition certificate, an outdoors card or permit, a provincial or territorial identity card, or even a card from a local community services centre.

Obviously, these pieces of identification are accepted. Original documents with a name and residential address are also accepted; credit card statements, bank account statements, public utility bills, municipal property tax evaluations, school report cards, residential leases, statements of benefits, as well as income tax notices of assessment.

It should be understood that there is no shortage of pieces of identification. Obviously, the easiest is to present an identification card with photo and address, like a driver's licence; however, not everybody has one and we are well aware of that. Next, there is a whole list of documents with name and address, two of which could be presented in order to vote, whether they have a photo or not.

The residents of Quebec should recognize that it is the same thing for the provincial elections: they must always bring their pieces of identification when they go to vote. As for the people who are responsible for applying the law, they should know that it is done out of respect for the institution; that is to say to ensure that the right people are voting. The procedure is very respectful. It will help election workers prevent fraud and error.

Above all, we are not falling into the trap where we allow the famous declaration under oath, without requiring any piece of identification, as was previously allowed. A voter could declare that he or she was the proper person without those who were working at the polling station really knowing that person's identity. It was enough just to make a declaration. From now on, that will not be tolerated. An eligible voter will have to vouch for someone who does not have the proper identification.

If you do not have identification, you must be accompanied by someone who fulfills all the conditions—an individual who has identification, who was able to vote and who can vouch for you because they personally know you. This is allowed but you have to be accompanied by someone who knows you. Therefore, if there was fraud or whatever, the person who vouched for you would be responsible and liable to legal proceedings.

The Bloc Québécois is pleased to support Bill C-18 at second reading. We hope that amendments will be made quickly because elections can be called earlier than anticipated when a minority government is in power, particularly when the government acts like a majority government, as is the case at present, and is very arrogant

towards the other parties. As the chief organizer of the Bloc Québécois, I am in a position to say that we will be pleased to go head to head with the Conservatives anywhere and anytime.

• (1625)

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): 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 Jeanne-Le Ber, Public Safety; the hon. member for Malpeque, Agriculture.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was particularly struck by the member's focus on his province, and his own constituents, particularly those who have been disenfranchised.

The member will know that the NDP voted against the original Bill C-31 because of the very issue of disenfranchisement. Our concerns are that those issues still remain unresolved. There still will be literally thousands, if not tens of thousands, of homeless individuals who will have no means of being able to vote.

Despite the hon. member's concern for his constituents, he suggested that this bill would kind of make everything okay. From the NDP perspective, it still leaves unresolved all the key issues, in particular the matter of a statutory declaration, which we believe would go a long way to resolving that issue. The bill before us now will not address that and it will still to leave a number of my constituents and a number of his disenfranchised. They will be unable to participate.

Perhaps he could help close that gap for me in terms of understanding the Bloc members original support for Bill C-31, their support of this bill and his personal concern raised here today about those who will be disenfranchised. The disenfranchisement will still continue even after Bill C-18 is passed, which in effect amends Bill C-31. Would the member be good enough to help me understand and close the gap between the two trains of thought?

• (1630)

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Speaker, first I would like to say to my colleague that there is no problem in Quebec. The legislation has been in place for more than 10 years. Contrary to what our colleague believes, there is no problem.

In the bill before us, it is clear that the person who goes to vote, but who does not have an address and wishes to vote, can do so provided that they are accompanied by someone who fulfills all the conditions and who vouches for them. That has always been the case. My colleague would like a voter without an address to be allowed to swear an oath. I am sorry but that is what has caused confusion, mistakes and, on occasion, fraud.

Government Orders

The bill before us here today allows people who do not have an address to vote, on the condition that they have a vouching elector who meets all the requirements. This changes nothing. This is how it is done in Quebec and no one has lost their right to vote. A voter simply has to know someone in the same polling division. Voters cannot report just anywhere, and at any time, to vote. Even in the case of homeless people, someone nearby usually knows them. Someone will be used to seeing that homeless person on the street corner. If they report to a polling station, someone who knows them can vouch for them. That is how it works.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was not going to rise, but I have to after that explanation.

I was at the committee when Bill C-31 was discussed. We heard testimony from people from first nations. We heard from students and advocates for the homeless. They were very clear that there needed to be a process in place that would allow the people they advocated for to vote and that if Bill C-31 went ahead the way it did, they would not be able to.

What did we do? We ignored them. We did not listen to them, because apparently we knew better. Well apparently we did not. Apparently they knew better because here we are trying to clean up the mess that we were told would happen.

Therefore, was the hon. member aware that at committee we heard from witnesses, from everyday Canadians, from the homeless, from first nations and from students. They said to us that if we did this, we would disenfranchise them. They asked us not to do it. Why in heaven's name did his party support that bill at the time?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague knows very well that the aim of the bill is to correct the situation for thousands of voters who do not have a civic address, but whose address is listed on the list of voters with their post office box or rural route number. This bill would recognize that the information on the list of voters matches that of the identification.

My colleague is trying to say that the scope of the bill must be expanded to include those who do not have identification and who know no one. Evidently, this already exists in Quebec, and we are not having this problem.

In some measure, we are not prepared to allow just anyone to go and vote. What the hon. member is proposing is even worse. It would be more advantageous for them to never produce any identification. It would be much easier to enforce the NDP's solution. In Quebec, this would mean turning back the clock 10 or 15 years, which we are not prepared to do.

[*English*]

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is not with great pleasure that I stand today to debate Bill C-18.

As a member from a northern riding, I am debating a bill that may solve some of the issues within our riding, but it does not really get at the essential nature of the change in the voting system that will disenfranchise many people and will create great confusion and

hardship in voting, at least in the next election, if not many other elections into the future.

When I stand today to speak to Bill C-18, I truly want to speak to Bill C-31. I want to speak to a bill that, in its nature, I cannot support. Its nature will change the way Canadians view their essential political rights in our country. It is a bill that I do not understand and I do not see where the direction is. I have to go back in some ways to Bill C-31 to look at some of the reasons given by our government members in putting forward the bill.

The member for Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre spoke to the bill on June 18. He said:

What we are trying to do, by presenting a bill that will give increased and expanded voting opportunities for all Canada, is attempt to raise the level of voter turnout because.

To say that by creating these types of conditions that need to be in place for the voter to vote, we will increase the voter turnout in this country is, by any stretch of the imagination, patently absurd.

He went on to say, which is something more personal:

I think there is no greater fraud that could be perpetrated on Canadians than that of an individual voting in a federal or provincial election who pretends to be someone that he or she is not.

That is quite a significant fraud. We have seen greater fraud in the House over the past two years with the member for Vancouver Kingsway. He did not even take the time for the House to open up before he jumped across the floor and demonstrated his utter contempt for the voters who elected him. That is a greater fraud by far than a single voter who may misinterpret where he or she is supposed to vote or may make a mistake in the location of his polling station.

At the same time, the Minister for Democratic Reform spoke. He said:

As I have mentioned on other occasions, this bill makes a number of changes to the electoral process that will reduce the opportunity for electoral fraud, improve the accuracy of the national register and the lists of electors, facilitate communication with the electorate and improve the administration of elections.

Let us look at some of those statements. He said "Improve the accuracy of the national registry". Where, in any of the discussions we have had over the past while, do we see a better enumeration system? Clearly, that is one thing we need. Many of the problems we have in the voting system in Canada come from the attempts of the current government and previous governments to reduce the work and the effort that is put into the enumeration system across the country. That is one of the serious problems we have with voting.

This bill and Bill C-31 will not change that. They will not make the system more complete. They will not ensure that people are carefully enumerated and that we have the kind of system that our parents and grandparents built up over many years.

● (1635)

Will it facilitate communication with the electorate? I do not see how that will happen with these two bills. What we are going to see is a situation in which many people will find, for one reason or another, that they do not have the proper identification or the proper address or that the address does not match. They are going to be turned off voting.

Government Orders

That is going to happen with a lot of very young voters. That is going to happen with voters who are in disadvantaged situations across this country, the homeless, the poor and the people who have to work long hours and do not have the opportunities that others do.

I know that federal employees have consecutive hours off work in order to vote. The people who are less advantaged across this country will find it more difficult to vote. They are going to have to ensure that on voting day they carry their identification and make even more of an effort than they are accustomed to in many cases to carry out what is their fundamental, democratic right in this country.

The government is responsible for the bills that it brings forward and for the accuracy and the scrutiny that should go into every piece of legislation that is as important as this one, as important as this legislation that goes to the fundamental nature of our democratic system, which is the right and the ability to vote and the certainty that a voter has when he goes into the voting booth.

The government has completely failed Canadians here. It has brought forward another piece of legislation wherein they are attempting to fix their mistakes yet it does not go far enough. Our party says that if the government wants to fix the mistakes in Bill C-31 then it should go back to what the NDP said previously.

What we proposed previously was to allow the voters to swear that they are who they say they are at the polling station. Then, if there is doubt about the identity of the voter, the voter would put forth sworn testimony that they are who they are and they have the eligibility to vote in that riding. That is trust in Canadians and Canadians deserve our trust.

In the last four elections, where probably in excess of 60 million votes were cast, there have been four cases of voter fraud. All this work that we have been doing in Parliament is taking a big sledgehammer and knocking down a tiny gnat. That is voter fraud in Canada. This bill is a huge sledgehammer.

Then, as for improving the administration of elections, Bill C-31 is going to turn the next election day into a fiasco. We are going to have hundreds of thousands of people, millions of people, standing at polling stations across the country, people who do not understand the rules, who do not have the proper identification and who do not have everything lined up. Canadians are used to voting one way and they will come out to vote and find that the rules have been completely changed. The administration of elections in this next period will be a mess. It will reflect badly on this country and on the voting process of many citizens.

I find these reasons to be bogus at best.

Let us look at what is going on here. We are taking the time now to bring a bill forward that will assist Bill C-31 and some of the errors that were made in that bill in terms of the layout. I heard the comments today from the Conservative government that the opposition did not pick up on these mistakes in committee and therefore it is the fault of the opposition that the bill is not correct.

Why are we doing this? The most cynical bone in my body says that this is a social conditioning exercise.

It will be followed by other social conditioning exercises to ensure that Canadians slowly give up their individual freedoms and

slowly find that they have to show identification for whatever they are doing at every step of the way in this country. I do not like that. I still feel that Canadians are trustworthy and that we should encourage trust among Canadians. The concept of continually asking Canadians for their identification at every possible opportunity is the wrong road to go down. Those are my views on dealing with those issues.

• (1640)

I would like to move on now to issues that concern my riding.

Last month I had the opportunity to attend a meeting at Paulatuk, a community high on the Arctic coast. We talked about photo ID and identification. There is no place in Paulatuk to get identification. The residents have to go to Inuvik, which requires a plane flight, to get any kind of identification. Quite obviously, many of the residents do not have current identification. They do not need it in Paulatuk because everybody knows everybody.

When people in Paulatuk go to the polls on election day, the returning officer is going to ask for verification for all kinds of people and they will not have the required identification. They do not have the opportunity to go to Inuvik. They do not have the opportunity to get that set up. That will make a travesty out of a community's life. People who have known each other throughout their whole lives will have to show identification to each other.

That is a difficulty. That is a fundamental problem within this legislation. It does not deal with the honest and trustworthy nature of Canadians. It does not consider that. Unless someone proves who they are, says this legislation, they must not be who they say they are.

In fact, even if an elector has identification but it is not quite what is wanted, as I have said, what happens is that under proposed subsection 3.2, "a deputy returning officer, poll clerk, candidate or a candidate's representative who has reasonable doubts concerning the residence of an elector" appearing in front of them "may request that the elector take the prescribed oath". We are putting it in the hands of all those people to decide the trustworthiness of that Canadian, but we are not allowing the Canadian himself to say that he is trustworthy and give his oath that he is a citizen and is legally within the jurisdiction and has the right to vote. To me, that is the solution we should be going forward with.

The changes that are going to be made with this bill will help a problem that has been created by Bill C-31, but will not help the problems inherent within it. They will also discourage Canadians from voting. They will reduce the already pathetic voter turnout in this country. They will probably reduce it among those who should vote, those who are disenfranchised from the system, those who need to express their opinions on politicians and the people who run this country.

This is a difficult situation for anyone who did not support Bill C-31. We are being asked to repair some damage that the bill caused, not nearly all of it, but we are still going to leave our electoral system in chaos in the next election. The government is still not providing a decent rationale for its actions. It is not coming clean with Canadians about what it is trying to accomplish here.

Government Orders

To me, Bill C-18 is totally inappropriate because it does not go far enough toward fixing the problems that have been created with the other bill. Until the government realizes the fundamental mistakes it made in the previous legislation, how is it going to fix them with this patchwork? How is the government going to make the changes that are going to make this work for Canadians in the next election and elections in the future? It is not. That is the problem.

• (1645)

We can send this bill to committee. We can try to work with other parties in Parliament to fix errors in a bill that is not appropriate, but that is not good enough. For Canadians, one of the only hopes we have now is what is happening with the charter challenge on Bill C-31. It is being challenged in our courts for its unreasonable nature in terms of our fundamental rights as Canadian citizens.

We will have to wait and see. Perhaps this problem will be solved for us by the courts, but that is a crying shame when we look at what has happened here in Parliament with this kind of legislation and the direction the government has taken. It is a real shame.

I am disappointed in the government. I am disappointed for my constituents. I do not want any of my constituents not to be able to vote, whether they are students travelling from one community to the other or transient people who have changed their address but have not changed it on their identification. Whatever the problem is, we will see problems with this bill that are hard to judge today, but they definitely will show up on election day. It will cast the whole system into some considerable doubt and will create a lot of pressure for change after the next election.

I do not know what we were doing when we brought forward Bill C-31 or what the thinking was there, but as a Canadian, as someone who prizes my right to vote and the right of every other citizen to vote comfortably and cleanly without any conditions put on that right, I am not happy with this. I do not think the bill is appropriate. I certainly hope that the courts will adjudge the same. That will solve the problem for us and bring it back to the reality of our electoral system, our voting system, which has worked well for us.

If there were examples of large scale fraud that came before the courts, we might have a case to say that we needed to be more vigilant here. We should have opened up the whole act and looked at how to review it to ensure that deputy returning officers and poll clerks all have the proper authority to deal with the issues that come in front of them. Instead, we took this course. Is it a course that is going to work for us? I do not think so. I think we have taken the wrong course and we need to right it.

If this Parliament does not do it, perhaps the courts will. I hope the voters realize this when they go into the voting booth in the next election and realize which parties caused the problems that they see in front of them, when they see the lineups and the people rejected from voting. I hope they think about it when they are going in to vote and I hope they cast their votes accordingly, realizing what the government has done to the system that was working well and was in place, a system that needed more work on the enumeration side and that needed the electoral act to be looked at in certain ways to ensure that the performance of the officers involved in conducting the elections is proper in this day and age.

Those are the things we should have looked at. We can attempt to fix this in a small fashion with this bill. We can fix the problems we have created with Bill C-31, but it is not good enough. It is not good enough and it should not be taking place in this Parliament.

• (1650)

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest to my friend gloomy-and-doomy down there as he spoke about social engineering. I want to assure him that there are no black helicopters circling his riding, or anybody else's, taking away Canadians' human rights. One would think the sky had fallen because all parties in this House made an honest error when Bill C-31 came through in the first place. That has been acknowledged by everyone except, apparently, the NDP. They voted against Bill C-31 for entirely different reasons. To suggest they saw this, of course, is completely false and disingenuous.

Credit should go to all parties that have said we need to fix this right away. The government responded. We have Bill C-18. It will fix the problem of rural voters right away. That is what was asked for and that is what is being done.

Therefore, the gloom and doom from down the way is just silly, frankly. The government has taken action. I would like to ask my hon. colleague a simple question. Is he going to support this bill or not? All parties, including his, asked for action to be taken and it is being taken. Is he supporting it or not?

• (1655)

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Mr. Speaker, this is not the only problem we have seen with Bill C-31. We just had another with Bill C-6.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: You didn't see this problem in Bill C-31.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: I can assure my hon. colleague that through this process I have always said that this photo ID requirement for voting is wrong. I have never changed my position on that. I voted against Bill C-31. I did not even want to look at the provisions within it because I felt it was wrong from the beginning.

When it comes to fixing Bill C-31, which is what we are doing now, we are fixing a bill that was only in front of us six months ago. We have two bills in front of Parliament right now that are trying to fix Bill C-31. What a mess we have.

Who is responsible for that mess? Is it the opposition parties? Is it the government that brought it forward? I would say that it is the government's responsibility to bring forward bills that it has scrutinized and that it understands the implications of the bills. They should not be put forward in such a quick fashion that the government does not understand how they will affect hundreds of thousands and millions of Canadians.

Mr. Brian Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is the saying "Heavy is the head that wears the crown". I will go this far with my hon. friend from Western Arctic in saying that the government has the responsibility to bring forward legislation in various areas, including, in this case, democratic reform. However, it has missed the boat substantially. It did not take heed of loopholes or gaps in the legislation as it was reviewed by the Senate. Now the government is playing the game that everyone is to blame.

Government Orders

It seems to me that the Conservatives are still stuck in the opposition ways and Lord knows they were there so long that it may be a form that they cannot get out of, but let us hope they get back into it soon.

However, I differ from my friend from Western Arctic, although I deeply respect his comments. He represents a riding that is among the most affected ridings due to the deficiency in Bill C-31 as it relates to the actual issue which is the civic address on the list of electors versus the address or domicile that one presents through identification at the polling booth.

I respect his philosophical point of view but will he and his party not be blamed if thousands—in fact we know it is millions in the affected ridings—of people in his riding show up and cannot vote because his party did not act to do the band-aid approach, which is what this is, but will, nevertheless, put more voters back on the list by pushing it along and improving it in the committee and bringing forward the concerns that are deficiencies in Bill C-31 that my friend has raised?

Will the member not agree that we should at least move this along to committee, to put this band-aid on it, which is all the government can do, and we know that, in order to put back on the voting list the people who in his riding will be most affected?

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Mr. Speaker, I recognize the dilemma that we are in. We have proposed a solution that would deal with the issue. We have proposed that voters would be permitted to take an oath as to their legitimacy in voting in a particular riding at a particular poll. It is a simple solution. Why is it not adequate for the government? Why is it not adequate for the very small number of voter fraud cases that we have in this country? Why are we creating this convoluted mess in this country? Why are we not taking the simple solution?

If the bill goes forward to committee, we will still be asking for a simple solution to this. I do not know whether the amendment would be possible at this point in time. If we have to go ahead with an amended bill that is not amended in a simple fashion but in a more complex fashion, then we will be talking about it when the voters go to the polls. We will be talking about the failure of those parties to deal with the voters' rights.

● (1700)

Mrs. Betty Hinton (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, occasionally in this place, when we are debating any piece of legislation or private member's bill or whatever the case may be, oftentimes some very silly statements are made. Most of the time those are forgivable.

I have a very simple question for the member from the NDP. The member seems to think that there is no requirement for identification to vote. It is one of the things he has raised several times. I am wondering if the member from the NDP has ever taken out a video from a video store. People have to produce identification with a photograph on it to take out a video. How could taking out a video be more important than the basic democratic right in this country to vote? I would like to have an answer to that question.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Mr. Speaker, in my life in the Northwest Territories, I have rarely had to produce photo ID to take out a video at a video store.

One of the Conservatives' problems is mixing the rights in a public government with that of business opportunities and businesses that are conducted in a private fashion. These are two totally different things.

I think something needs to be said about the sanctity of voting in Canada and I am hoping that if we cannot do it here that the courts will do it, the courts will come up with an answer for us about that sanctity and that responsibility of all of us to ensure that everyone has the best possible opportunity to cast their vote in an election. That is what I want, that is why I am standing here today and that is why I have taken the position that I have.

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the report, "You Just Blink and It Can Happen: A Study of Women's Homelessness North of 60", was released. I wonder if the member might comment, since often people think that homelessness is an urban issue. I know this is an issue in his riding. How is the failure of this legislation to allow people who are homeless to register to vote an issue in his riding of Western Arctic?

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Mr. Speaker, in the Northwest Territories people are centralized. They may be in small communities and then move to larger centres. Issues occur and they become homeless. If those people have identification, it will be, in many cases, a driver's licence, which is a five year document in the Northwest Territories for which we pay \$80. Nobody changes their driver's licence without reason, especially—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Ottawa Centre.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, here we go again trying to deal with the problems of Bill C-31. I know that might not be the kind of comment that the government wants to hear but it has to look reality in the face. The only reason this bill is in front of us is because of what I said Bill C-31 was from the beginning, which is a solution looking for a problem.

We have found a couple of bills to date. We have Bill C-18, which is what we are debating today, and we have Bill C-6. I suppose we will have a couple more bills before it is all over.

If we go through the bill, one clause states that when swearing an oath to prove someone's identity, the person who vouches for another individual does not necessarily need a civic address on his or her ID if the information on the voters list matches up with the information on the ID.

The committee heard from groups of advocates, people representing the homeless, people representing aboriginal people and people representing students. The people representing the aboriginal people were very clear on this issue of civic address and all members of the committee heard it. They said that we would have problems identifying voters because some people do not have a civic address. I invite all members of the House, including members who may have been on the committee, to look at the blues and read the witnesses' comments where they invited us to look at this concern.

Government Orders

What they were saying is that if we were to go ahead and do this, we would be disenfranchising people, and did we disenfranchise people. We disenfranchised not a couple of hundred or a couple of thousand, but probably millions of people. Why? It is because the House, in its infinite wisdom, passed a bill that was not sufficient. It was not sufficient because the committee, I would submit, did not do its homework.

I asked the committee for more time to hear from witnesses beyond the list that we had in front of us and I was told, in the instance of the privacy commissioner, no because it had already heard from her. I had to take it upon myself to write to her and obtain a response about the whole issue of privacy and birthdate information. She readily supplied me with an opinion of the bill contrary to what members of the committee had believed, which was that there were concerns about privacy in the bill.

I would submit that we have in front of us a bill that is trying to mop up the mess that was created by a bill from the government. I would like members, perhaps during questions and comments or to seek me out afterward, to provide me with an explanation or an instance where Parliament has passed a bill and, within months of it coming into force, has had to come up with further bills to deal with the problems in the initial bill. We are now up to two bills, and counting, based on the flaws and problems in Bill C-31.

I know members of the government will say that I did not raise these problems in committee and that I did not have the wisdom of knowing that these things would come up. I would suggest that I did not foresee all of the problems but I certainly saw the problem, which was the way Bill C-31 was crafted.

The crafting of the bill was taken from a committee report. What seems to be the Conservative Party playbook is that committees are used to put forward one's agenda. A fairly lengthy report was written by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, there was a government response and within a week a bill was in front of us called Bill C-31.

Bill C-31 was introduced because there was a concern about potential voter fraud, and I triple underline "potential". When this was put in front of parliamentarians, they said that it had to be dealt with right away and cleaned up. In fact, that is what the committee did by way of hearing from a limited, in my opinion, number of witnesses.

● (1705)

It heard from witnesses like the Chief Electoral Officer who was asked if voter fraud was a major problem. They all heard quite clearly that it was not and that there had been approximately four cases of potential voter fraud in the last three elections.

We spent a large amount of time on it and we are spending more now trying to deal with this outrageous problem of voter fraud, but I have to give the government credit because it was clear in saying that it was potential voter fraud.

I have to submit that the concerns of my constituents are around cleaning up politics, ethics in politics, and integrity in the system. There is much more concern about candidate fraud, when candidates say they are with one party one day but wake up the next and lo and behold they are not a Liberal candidate anymore but rather a

Conservative cabinet minister. Constituents are more concerned about how to deal with that kind of lack of integrity, where people can run for a party, cross the floor, and virtually within minutes it seems jump into government or into cabinet.

How about going from the backroom of the Conservative Party into the Senate and then vaulting into cabinet? Those are the concerns that my constituents have around the integrity of our electoral system. They are not concerned about potential voter fraud other than not to make matters worse.

Excluding my party, what Parliament has done is pass a bill that disenfranchised so many people. In committee we talk about this often and say we should always be vigilant for the unintended consequences of legislation. We all know this. We heard from people who were advocates of the homeless and from aboriginal people.

We are talking about people who are living in rural areas. We identified that what we have now in front of us is a concern about actual addresses. We heard from people who were representing students. The surprising fact is that when we were at committee they told us quite clearly this would be a problem.

What did we do? We did not consider it to be that big a problem and that it would all be fine because we knew better. Well, we did not know better and here we are with a bill to prove it. It is Bill C-18.

What we did not do is consult. I have said it before, that our job is to consult and after we have consulted, consult some more until we are absolutely sure we have done our homework. That is not the case in the instance of Bill C-31. We in fact had worse than that. It was not unintended consequences but some intended consequences with birth date information. It bears repeating that in Bill C-31 there were unintended consequences.

We did not hear this from witnesses and everyday people at all, this need to have birth dates on the voters list as an oversight requirement. However, what was really strange and quite disturbing was that we had intended consequences at committee. Not only would the bill have one's birth date information on the voters list but it would be shared with political parties.

In this instance it was not unintended consequences but very intentional. Our friends from the Bloc brought forward a motion at committee supported by the Liberals. The government joined me in opposing the amendment but lo and behold by the time it got to the House for third reading, it lost its courage to fight for the privacy of Canadians and it collapsed.

As my friend from Winnipeg Centre said the other day, the government folded like a cheap suit. It just said, oh well, for the interest of getting the bill through it needed to ensure that it let the amendment go through. My goodness, we had the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, in a letter that I gave to the committee, ask:

Government Orders

Is the problem of voter fraud so serious and sufficiently widespread to require the use of additional personal information? If it is a serious problem, is it necessary to provide polling clerks with the date of birth or can the same objective be achieved using less detailed information?

● (1710)

She was clear in saying that we should not, but again we had the government and the opposition parties saying that it was okay, that they would let date of birth information go through and share it with political parties.

This kind of information is analogous to giving people, who would like to use this information for fraud purposes, a little kit. I was calling it a government sponsored identity theft kit. That is what we are giving people.

Members know that there have been recent reports about concerns regarding credit card theft and people who are able to access bank accounts. What do they need? They need a date of birth and an address, and a lot of harm can be done. We were going to give this not only to poll clerks where, with all due respect to them, that information might get lost, but also to political parties.

I know the Liberal Party wanted it because it needed to do a little more in terms of fundraising. The Bloc said that is how it does it and that it had done it before in Quebec. I have no idea what the government was going to do with it. I guess one day it will tell me or it will be written in one of its member's memoirs.

In the meantime, what we have is a privacy problem within this bill. Then we have a problem with leaving hundreds of thousands of people off the voters lists, and now we have Bill C-18 in front of us. I submit that not only did the government not get the job done and did not do its homework on this bill but that we also opened it up to having the unintended consequence of invading people's privacy.

We really have to question why, at a time when all politicians and all parties are saying we want more people to vote and we want to get young people interested in politics, we put up these barriers.

I have to give the example of Ontario, where Ontario has made some changes to the requirements to vote. It did not do a very good job at all in telling people that when they go to the voting stations now they have to provide some ID. Voters have to tell the poll clerks their names, their postal codes, et cetera. Having taken part in the most recent provincial election, I know of a senior in my riding who, when I knocked on her door to ask her if she was going to vote, said "I tried to vote but they would not let me".

That is exactly what is going to happen in the next federal election and I am not sure that this bill is going to solve that problem. The reason she said that is because she did not have the required ID and she had no one to vouch for her.

I can guarantee members that that will be the situation for hundreds and thousands, if not more, Canadians if we do not change the law. The law needs to be changed for people who do not have the requisite identification, in this case a senior who had lived in this particular domicile for more than a decade and did not have the requisite ID. We are going to see people disenfranchised like never before.

In fact, what we will see unless we change the law, with something like a statutory declaration, is people who are disenfranchised in the rural areas, in the north, in the urban areas, as well as homeless and transient people.

What we need to do is take a good look at this bill and at what the poison pills are in this bill. We saw the poison pills in Bill C-31. Are there any in here? I would submit there are a couple and I would just ask the government to do a very simple thing and look at enumeration. Why in heaven's name is it not going to engage in universal enumeration at every election for the universal suffrage of all of our citizens that we so obviously respect?

The other thing is not only to have universal enumeration and spend money there, but to make sure we train people properly. Those are nuts and bolts things, common sense things that we put forward at committee. The statutory declaration was another thing.

Finally, regarding the voting cards that everyone is so concerned about, and I am one of them, that are ubiquitous in some of these lobbies, put them in envelopes for goodness' sakes, address them to the voters, and if the voters are not present at those domiciles, they would be returned.

Presently, these cards are left around and open to potential voter fraud, I agree, but for goodness' sake, use this terrific new technology called an envelope, address it to the elector, and if the person does not live there anymore, it will be returned to sender, in this case to Elections Canada.

● (1715)

That is yet another way we can improve the system. It is another suggestion the NDP had. We should clean up the voters list, make sure we have actual human beings going door to door to clean it up, put the voters cards in envelopes, and ensure that there is a safety gap with the statutory declaration.

I must say that some of the critiques about statutory declarations are ridiculous. It suggests to me that there is mistrust among some members of everyday people, of citizens of Canada. As I said, there should be more scrutiny of people who cross the floor than citizens who are trying to engage in their franchise.

We will have to go to committee and try to fix yet another government bill, a mess that was made with the mélange of the three parties to ensure that Canadians will not be left out.

Members should read the blues of the committee. We were told by the Chief Electoral Officer that the way Bill C-31 was written and the way this bill is written now, goodness knows the way this bill was put through without us trying to fix it, people will show up at polling stations and will be sent away. They will not return.

Government Orders

That is what will happen at five minutes to eight or five minutes to nine, just before the poll closes, if people have to go get more ID because they do not have sufficient ID or they have to find another person to vouch for them. I can guarantee that people who have been voting all their lives, particularly people like the senior referenced in the Ontario election who had voted all her life, will just plain give up, and that is pathetic. It says that we have not done our job here.

I am not willing to do that, to allow our government to provide legislation that will disenfranchise. My party will not and I will not. We will make sure this bill, from our perspective, will make sure that Canadians, every day people, will not be disenfranchised. Then we will have some semblance of common sense in our electoral system.

I sincerely hope that the government will engage us this time in some of the ideas I have put forward, three straightforward ideas, and that it will take a look at it with honesty and sincerity, and say that maybe this is not a bad idea.

When we are talking about our democracy, the foundation and the franchise, people fought for it, as we just celebrated on Remembrance Day. To just let it fray away, to watch it be torn apart because of either ill-conceived notions or worse, as I said before, conceived notions, is not something we in this party will stand by and see happen.

I will just wrap up with a couple of comments about what can be done to ensure, through witnesses at committee, that we not have the fiasco and the mess we had with Bill C-31 yet again.

I would ask that parliamentarians go to their ridings. I have done this already. I have talked to people about the proposition of not only Bill C-31, but further to Bill C-31, Bill C-6 and Bill C-18. I am not sure as many people were engaged with Bill C-31. There has been a wake-up call, clearly, because of the mess of Bill C-31, and the fact that we have disenfranchised in a blink hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Canadians.

However, hon. members should talk to everyday people in their constituencies and ask them what would happen tomorrow if they had to follow the requirements of the present legislation before us. Would they be able to vote? Would they have a problem finding someone to vouch for them? Would they have the requisite ID? Hon. members should go to a seniors residence, go to a homeless shelter, talk to some students, and then find out from them if there are problems, because that is the business of consultation.

That is what I did last week vis-à-vis Bill C-6, and I heard a lot of concerns. I would plead, almost beg, with members of Parliament to talk to their constituents on this bill because we did not consult enough last time. Let that not happen again.

Let us engage our citizens on this. It is their right. We are making up the rules here for them. We made a mess of it with Bill C-31. We need not do that again. Hon. members should talk to their constituents and then bring witnesses forward to committee through their respective representatives on committee, so we can hear from everyday people about how this would affect them. That did not happen last time.

• (1720)

The people who did come forward warned us that there would be problems, but sadly, members did not listen to them. Our party did. That is why we voted against Bill C-31.

We now have two bills which are trying to clean up Bill C-31. I am not sure if this is a record. I will have to look it up. We need to clean this up.

Mr. Brian Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great attention to the member's point of view. I realize that he is a veteran of the Bill C-31 committee and I respect that. I will take him at his word that his Cassandra-like calls of the problem that Bill C-18 is attempting to solve were in fact made and that they were not simply the remarks of Mr. Mayrand with respect to attestation for the people in the homeless shelters, student foyers and seniors homes. That is what I saw on the record so far as the Cassandra call. If my friend says that he brought up the exact problem that is being addressed in Bill C-18, I will take him at his word.

I do recognize that he, like I, probably has not been faced with a lot of problems in his riding regarding this very aspect. This is primarily a rural issue with respect to addresses not being civic addresses as mandated by the act.

I realize he has a philosophy and a point of view and I respect that, but I do not necessarily agree with it. I agree that Bill C-18 is a big government band-aid from a government that does not seem to care about the details that it should as a government.

Would the member agree with me, is this not a partial solution to a problem affecting one million rural voters in this country to whom we owe a duty before the next election to give them the right to vote? Is that not what we are trying to do by sending this bill to committee? We must show the government that it has a duty and a responsibility to be more responsible in the field of democratic reform.

• (1725)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Speaker, Cassandra comments aside, please, I would like to point out to the member that I do not think this is ideological at all. This is about getting the job done and making sure we do our homework.

That is why I underlined the point that at committee we heard from people who said that there would be a problem with civic addresses for people in rural areas. In fact, if we look at the blues, at committee it was very clear that this would be a problem and we were warned.

I am not sure what his party was doing at committee and why the Liberals decided to support this bill and, along with the Bloc, amend the bill so that our privacy would be up for sale with the birthdate information. That is not ideological, or maybe it is ideological. It is about what I thought was a liberal value. I mention John Stuart Mill. Perhaps the member might want a reference on the protection of privacy and look at why we would have birthdate information on the voters list and with political parties. That is what his party voted for; let us be clear.

Private Members' Business

I did not want to get into an ideological discourse here. Simply put, of course we will try and clean it up. My point was how did we get here? We got here because it was an ill-conceived bill. When my party brought forward amendments that were based on witness testimony, we were not listened to.

I was simply pointing out that this time members should talk to their constituents about this. We should make sure that we have proper witnesses in front of the committee. We should make sure, for goodness' sake, that we listen to them this time.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member for Victoria should know that I will interrupt her at 5:30 p.m. We have two minutes for the question and answer.

[*English*]

Ms. Denise Savoie (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House we want an electoral system that is as impeccable as possible. My colleague has explained very clearly why we so strongly objected to Bill C-31 in the first place, and which now has to be cleaned up.

It seemed that the government wanted to fix a non-problem when there are so many real problems, such as the prosperity gap, the environment, an Americanized foreign policy, but no. The government chose to fixate on a non-problem and thereby created real problems, and as my colleague has pointed out, both the Liberals and the Conservatives supported the bill. Now they agree that there are perhaps some problems that we pointed out during the debate on Bill C-31.

I wonder, when I go back to some of the solutions that my colleague pointed out, why not have a clearer, stronger enumeration process that would give us real lists? Why not accept a statutory declaration that would address some of these problems? Could he explain what the government might have been thinking in choosing such an obtuse solution, whereas we could be dealing with very clear and simple solutions?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It being 5:30 p.m., the hon. member will have to explain at another time. There will be five minutes left when Bill C-18 returns to the House and the hon. member for Ottawa Centre could respond to those comments.

The House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1730)

[*English*]

NATIONAL PEACEKEEPERS' DAY ACT

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, Lib.) moved that Bill C-287, An Act respecting a National Peacekeepers' Day, be read the third time and passed.

He said: Mr. Speaker, it is not often that a member is honoured by his colleagues by getting a bill to third reading. We are here because the bill received unanimous consent of the House at report stage. I want to thank all of my colleagues for their support.

Bill C-287 honours our Canadian peacekeepers as well as all peacekeepers around the world. It is very appropriate that the House return its attention to the proposal in the bill to create August 9 of each year as National Peacekeepers' Day in Canada, especially as all of us have just finished helping our legions and our communities celebrate Remembrance Week and Remembrance Day.

I would like to underline that August 9 would not be a holiday, but a day of commemoration, a day of celebration of what our peacekeepers have done in the past and what they are doing today and what they will be doing in the future. On that day our citizens will have a chance to be reminded about what Canada has done in the world and what it can do.

The bill proposes that on that day the Peace Tower flag be lowered to half-mast. It is quite appropriate that the Peace Tower flag would be lowered at half-mast to recognize peacekeepers who have been lost in action throughout our 50 years plus of peacekeeping participation around the world.

I would also like to point out to my colleagues that my riding, now called Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, contains the old riding of Algoma and Algoma East which was held by the late Right Hon. Lester B. Pearson. It is a special honour for me to bring forward a bill to honour our peacekeepers. This year, 2007, marks the 50th anniversary of Mr. Pearson's Nobel Peace Prize for his initiative at the UN.

Why in the first place should we remember and honour our peacekeepers and why on that day?

On August 9, 1974, nine Canadian peacekeepers deployed to the Middle East were killed on a routine supply flight from Beirut to Damascus. The airplane was shot down by ground-fired missiles and nine Canadian UN peacekeepers were lost, along with the crew of the airplane. We could have picked many dates. Some suggested, with great respect, May 29, which each year is celebrated as International Peacekeepers' Day, but August 9 is very much a Canadian day and reflects the most significant single loss of Canadian peacekeepers in one day.

If the House continues its willingness to support the bill, I am inviting Canadians, especially students, who would not be in school on August 9 but would be preparing for school, to take some time to reflect on what peacekeeping is all about.

We in this place and Canadians in general who think about these things recognize that peacekeeping today is not like it was 30, 40 or 50 years ago. Peacekeeping evolves with the nature of conflict. It evolves with the changing regions wherein conflicts are taking place. The reasons for local conflict change. Demographics change. The types of warfare and conflict change. Therefore, peacekeeping has to change and we have to change with the times.

I am convinced, and I am sure my colleagues are convinced, that ultimately peacekeeping and its related peacemaking are the ultimate, albeit altruistic sometimes, goal of our military and in fact of our Parliament and of our own individual work in life. If it is not about finding, making and keeping peace, then really, what is it all about?

● (1735)

I will take a moment to mention a constituent of mine, Robert Manuel of Elliot Lake, who inspired me with this idea. He helped to promote the idea in Ontario, which has celebrated August 9 as peacekeepers day for a number of years now. With his encouragement and support, we gathered the support of legions across the land. We now have the support of the Royal Canadian Legion Dominion Command for the proclamation of August 9 as peacekeeper day.

I will reference speeches made just over a year ago in this place by colleagues, speeches which I reread recently, and I was very impressed. I refer to the speech of the parliamentary secretary who made an excellent speech in support of the bill. She raised some very good points, but she reminded us that a day of recognition for peacekeepers, as is noted in the resolution by the Royal Canadian Legion in last June, was warranted because the government respected the views of Canadians on either side of the issue.

She is right to have said there is a concern. I recognize it and I think we deal with it head-on. When we have a day separate from November 11 to recognize some aspect of our military history, some aspect of our legacy, does that take anything away from November 11? I think the Royal Canadian Legion Dominion Command and local legions everywhere have recognized, no.

The parliament secretary was quite right in raising the question. The response is, and I think she agrees with this, any day we can establish as a day of recognition of our current soldiers, men and women serving in any capacity around the world enhances the spirit of remembrance. We are focusing on peacekeeping, but in a way all soldiers are peacekeepers regardless of the nature of a conflict.

I am not sure if my colleagues would agree, but in my riding of Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasung the spirit of remembrance is getting stronger. The number of people coming out to events is larger and larger every year. That is because the remembrance brand, a brand promoted effectively and with great strength by the legions and the Dominion Command, is spread out throughout the year. Hence, the movement to Remembrance Week. I am not suggesting a remembrance year, but it is very important that we do throughout the year other occasions throughout the year where people could be reminded and that helps focus attention even more so on November 11.

I appreciated the parliamentary secretary's comments in that regard. I was most impressed with my colleague from Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, referring to our peacekeepers, who said:

First, they are a key component of multilateralism, a conflict resolution principle very dear to the hearts of Quebecers. UN peacekeeping missions represent an impartial and very widely accepted way to share the burden and act effectively.

In fact, I recommend all these speeches to my colleagues in their complete version. I am only able to quote a little bit.

My colleague from Victoria, who spent time in the military, said:

Private Members' Business

We cannot stress enough the importance of the work of those who serve in the armed forces, who put themselves in harm's way for Canada. There is no word to describe the magnitude of their sacrifice, nor my feeling of gratitude—which all Canadians also share...

I think we all share that with her.

I go on to my colleague from West Nova who is fortunate to have in his riding the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre. He spoke eloquently in support of this bill. I will quote from his remarks. He said:

● (1740)

Peacekeeping is a dynamic concept that responds to changes in the international environment in order to create security for those affected by conflict. Traditionally, peacekeeping took place between two states in order to monitor a peace treaty upon which all parties had agreed. These early missions were traditionally military in nature.

He makes a very important point that I wish to expand on. He stated:

The role of peacekeeping has expanded to include the delivery of humanitarian aid, supervision of elections, repatriation of refugees, disarming of warring factions, and the clearing of landmine.

I point out to my colleagues that in the “Whereas” section, along with members of Canadian Forces, the bill specifically includes police services, diplomats and civilians. Yes, we are recognizing on August 9 the loss of nine soldiers in 1974 in the Middle East, because the beginning of this was focused on the military.

I mentioned we are evolving and now we engage Canadians in a broad range of professions and skill sets to assist, whether they are members of the NGO community, or municipal policemen who volunteered to help, or ambulance or first aid workers. Any Canadian, military or not, who supports Canada's efforts to bring peace, keep peace or make peace is a peacekeeper.

In the bill I deliberately did not define “peacekeeper”. Each person who thinks about these things can define peacekeeper in his or her own unique way. It is a comprehensive. That is actually the view of the Legion Dominion Command. It has an expanded view of peacekeeper, and I laud it for that. Somebody else may have a restricted view of peacekeeper. It does not matter, as long as what we are recognizing is the spirit of what peacekeeping is all about.

I invite this place from time to time, whenever we have debates on military and peace matters, and I invite Canadians every August 9 in particular to take a few moments to reflect on our legacy and where we are going as a nation of peacekeepers. Imagine being called peacekeepers. It is not the same as avoiding conflict.

Private Members' Business

I would include in peacekeeping the need to be strong and to root out the enemy where necessary. It is not simply sitting back all the time and letting local combatants fight things out. Each situation requires its own solution. It is important that we do not limit ourselves by a specific definition.

I want to underline too that this is not about what we are doing in Afghanistan whatsoever. That is a whole separate debate. I went to support the troops rally on November 2 in my riding and I was glad to be there. I am sure many of my colleagues were at rallies in their ridings.

It was a non-political event. It did not matter if people believed that we should be in Afghanistan for years or, like so many of us, that the military should pull out of a combat role in February 2009 or tomorrow. That is not the debate. When people support their troops, they support their troops. They are doing a job for us. They are there with a mandate and while they are there in our name, we support them.

I want to pay tribute to Sandy Finamore and Bob Tardif of Elliot Lake who sponsored that rally. I commend them for the excellent work they did.

I want to point out that the bill at report stage had a few very minor amendments. It was made very clear that in Quebec les casques bleus is the standard terminology for a peacekeeper. Therefore, we made sure there was no misunderstanding between gardiens de la paix and casques bleus.

We make it very clear that this is not a holiday. It is not even a day of heritage. It is a day of recognition, of commemoration, a day to take time to understand what our peacekeepers throughout history, in the present and in the future will do.

I hope the chamber will continue its support of the bill when it comes to a final vote in the not too distant future.

• (1745)

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest and I commend my colleague on his effort and commitment to this cause.

August 9 had a special meaning for me. I was driving down the autobahn in Germany, between Baden and Lahr, when I heard the news on the radio of that incident. In fact, the pilot of that airplane was a friend of mine named Keith Mirau. He and I had been flying instructors together in years previous.

I have to admonish my hon. colleague just a little. Keith would bristle at being called a soldier. He was an airman, but I know there was no intent there.

I have not so much a question, but a comment to reinforce something my colleague said. Everything every member of the Canadian Forces does every day is about peace in one way or another, peacekeeping, peacemaking, bringing peace, as my colleague said. I would like people to, as he mentioned, broaden their definition of peacekeepers.

The folks in uniform and the folks out of uniform, who he mentioned, contribute incredibly to peace around the world in one

way or another. We owe them our thanks and August 9 is a great day to do that, to just pause and reflect.

He may wish to respond to that or not, but congratulations on a good effort.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: I will be brief, Mr. Speaker, in case other members want to comment.

I agree with the member. Let us leave the definition open so each person in his or her own way can interpret it.

I also agree with my colleague's interpretation that all our military men and women in one way or another are involved in peacekeeping.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want also to commend the hon. member for his efforts on the bill. The entire veterans affairs committee was in agreement with the bill. We worked together on it to ensure it was something with which we were entirely 100% in agreement.

I may have heard the member wrongly when he gave his initial address, but one of the aspects that we were in agreement upon was this. November 11 is the time when the peace tower flag comes down to recognize all veterans equally, to ensure that all veterans are remembered on that day. This was one of the agreements we had.

Could the member clarify what he meant in his words earlier?

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Mr. Speaker, I certainly did not intend to cause any confusion, if I did. I absolutely support that November 11 is the day of remembrance in Canada.

Additional days, such as April 9, Vimy Ridge Day, August 9, if it passes, National Peacekeepers' Day, are days in support of November 11. The flag would be at half-mast on August 9 to recognize those who have specifically given their lives in the cause of peacekeeping, however peacekeeping is defined in one's mind. Those are military personnel, civilians, police forces, firemen and NGO workers who have worked in the cause of peace.

Mrs. Betty Hinton (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to join my colleagues in support of Bill C-287, An Act respecting a National Peacekeepers' Day.

Let me begin by commending the members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, who worked together in a spirit of cooperation. As a result, this legislation has the unanimous support of all parties.

We were able to make amendments to address several issues and to improve the bill.

As a member of Parliament, I am very proud to have been part of a committee that kept the language very simple. It states in fullness:

Throughout Canada, in each and every year, the ninth day of August shall be known as "National Peacekeepers' Day".

For greater certainty, National Peacekeepers' Day is not a legal holiday or a non-judicial day.

We were able to amend the language to make sure that we were being as inclusive as possible. For instance, we changed “peace support missions” to “peace support operations” and added the words “diplomats and civilians” after “Canadian police services”.

I would like to thank the representatives of the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping, the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans in Canada, the Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association, and the Royal Canadian Legion, who came to the committee and shared their insights with us. They provided the committee with a very detailed history of the movement of the Canadian Peacekeepers' Day and the significance of August 9.

If I may, I would like to offer special thanks to Colonel Don Ethell, the honorary president of the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping, for his tireless work in this initiative. During his 38 year career in the Canadian military, Colonel Ethell served on 14 peacekeeping tours and other secondments to United Nations agencies.

After his retirement, Don has continued to serve his country and his fellow veterans with great energy and passion. He made an outstanding contribution to the development of the new veterans charter and today he sits as chair of the Operational Stress Injuries Social Support Advisory Committee.

I know that Don would prefer to give the credit to others, but today I want to thank him for really making a difference. I can say that Canada is a better place because of people like Don Ethell.

As members will know, the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs is a relatively new committee of the House, but I am proud to say that all the members were united in working on behalf of our veterans. We are all inspired by their service and sacrifice.

I would like to congratulate the hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasung for bringing Bill C-287 forward to the House. We all share his desire to recognize the tens of thousands of Canadian men and women who have served our country and have made a significant contribution to international peace and security.

I can assure all members of this House that this government, more than any other in recent history, is committed to giving every possible support to members of the Canadian Forces. We are also committed to ensuring that Canadian veterans are treated with the dignity and respect they have earned and deserve. They have brought honour to Canada and we will honour them.

Since 1919, Canadians from coast to coast to coast have paused each year on November 11 to remember their brave countrymen and countrywomen who have given their all in the service of Canada. Through this national act of remembrance, we honour all veterans.

We honour those who served in war and those who served in peace. We honour those who served in all theatres of war. We honour those who have served in Canada, helping our communities respond to and recover from natural disasters. We honour those who continue to stand for peace and freedom in operations all over the world and most recently in Afghanistan.

This legislation constitutes a specific recognition of Canada's peacekeepers, who have so selflessly contributed to international peace and security. The concept of peacekeeping was a Canadian

Private Members' Business

innovation. Our sterling reputation for peacekeeping is well-earned and is based on a long tradition, indeed, one that spans over five decades.

In 1956, Canada played a leading role in the first United Nations Emergency Force, which was established to secure and supervise the end to hostilities in the Suez crisis. That operation distinguished our country and earned us the Nobel Prize for peace.

Our effectiveness in upholding peace was recognized once again in 1988, when Canada shared in a second Nobel Peace Prize as part of a United Nations peacekeeping mission.

• (1750)

Our peacekeepers, and in fact all peacekeepers, continue to be recognized internationally on the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers, May 29.

It has been suggested that we should adopt this day as Canada's Peacekeepers' Day, but as we all know, it is August 9 that resonates nationally for us as a day of recognition for peacekeepers, for it was on August 9, 1974, that nine Canadian peacekeepers serving with the United Nations Emergency Force in Egypt and Israel were in a Canadian Forces Buffalo transport aircraft that was shot down as it prepared to land at Damascus on a regular resupply mission.

On that day, there were no survivors. This represents the greatest loss of Canadian lives in a single day on a peacekeeping mission.

As we also know, nine provinces have now designated August 9 as Peacekeepers' Day. Ceremonies are held in communities across the country in honour of our peacekeepers, and now, with legislation, we will have a National Peacekeepers' Day.

Bill C-287 complements the other initiatives that have been taken to recognize and commemorate Canadian peacekeepers. Their contribution is commemorated in a very prominent way not far from this chamber. *Reconciliation*, the peacekeeping monument that sits on Sussex Drive, is still, I believe, the only monument of its kind in the world.

Our peacekeepers are also recognized by the Canadian Peacekeeping Service Medal. This award was created in 1997. It honours Canadians, primarily members of the Canadian Forces and members of Canadian police services who have served as peacekeepers. The Peacekeeping Service Medal is in keeping with Canada's traditional expressions of honour to members of the forces for their service.

Tens of thousands of veterans of Canada's peacekeeping and peace support operations wear this medal with pride. It is treasured by the families of those brave Canadians who have made the supreme sacrifice in the cause of peace.

The names of these brave men and women who have died in the service of Canada can be found in *The Seventh Book of Remembrance*. This sacred book, along with the six other *Books of Remembrance*, is found in the Memorial Chamber here in the Peace Tower. It is a special place of commemoration and reflection.

Private Members' Business

• (1755)

The Seventh Book of Remembrance is a testament to the often very difficult and dangerous circumstances in which our peacekeepers have served. On many deployments, there has been very little peace to keep and, unlike in times of war, the rules of engagement have been much less clear, if defined at all.

No matter what the circumstances, Canada's peacekeepers have strived to demonstrate exemplary discipline and professionalism. Often they must leave their families and homes behind, just as our veterans of the first world war, the second world war, the Korean war and the gulf war did.

With each deployment, they know their mission may require that they put their lives at risk. Canada's peacekeepers have courageously and selflessly served the cause of freedom, democracy and the rule of law. They have prevented wars and saved lives and they have contributed to international peace and security.

Through Bill C-287, we will honour their steadfast service, recognize their noble contributions and remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

It was Winston Churchill who said, "Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all others". That is the legacy of Canada's peacekeepers.

For more than 50 years, our peacekeepers have gone to the far corners of the world to help preserve peace. Their courage has given Canada a well deserved reputation for standing up for the values of freedom, tolerance, respect, dignity and the rule of law. We can only imagine the gratitude of those whose lives have been saved by the intervention of Canada's peacekeepers.

Veterans Affairs Canada has a special mandate to tell the story of those who have served our nation, both in times of war and times of peace, and to keep alive the memory of those who have made the supreme sacrifice.

Let me conclude by thanking my colleagues on the Standing Committee of Veterans Affairs for their support for this legislation. I would encourage all my hon. colleagues to help tell the story of our peacekeepers so that more Canadians, especially our youth, will better understand the significance of August 9, National Peacekeepers' Day.

• (1800)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today about Bill C-287, An Act respecting a National Peacekeepers' Day. The Bloc Québécois is in favour of this bill.

The strengths of this bill are the following: it recognizes the important role played by UN peacekeepers, which should be highlighted here, in this House. The Bloc Québécois is very much in favour of multilateralism as a method of settling international conflicts, and UN peacekeepers embody this approach. The peacekeepers who have died on UN missions deserve to be commemorated. This bill will also give our current Prime Minister an opportunity to discover that the peaceful use of our army is something that must absolutely be encouraged.

The only shortcoming is the date of the commemoration on August 9, which is not the first choice of the Bloc Québécois. We would have preferred a date that is already universally recognized as the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers: May 29.

There are a great many reasons to pay tribute to peacekeepers. They are a central element in multilateralism, a principle of conflict resolution that is dear to Quebeckers. The essentially international characteristic of the peacekeeping missions authorized by the United Nations Security Council grants unparalleled legitimacy to any intervention and attests to the determination of the entire international community to take tangible steps to deal with the crises that occur from time to time.

However, peacekeeping operations alone are not the appropriate instrument for every situation. They must be accompanied by a peace process, not replace it. United Nations peacekeeping operations are an impartial and very widely accepted way of not only sharing the burden, but acting effectively.

Peacekeepers are present throughout the world. The 18 operations directed by the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations are being carried out on four continents in 10 time zones, employ more than 90,000 people and have a direct influence on the lives of hundreds of millions of others.

Close to 64,200 people are currently serving as soldiers and military observers, and roughly 7,500 are in police forces. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations also employs nearly 5,250 international civilian personnel, over 11,300 local civilian personnel and approximately 1,720 United Nations volunteers. One hundred and eight countries contribute military and police personnel to UN peacekeeping operations.

The UN is the largest multilateral contributor to post-conflict stabilization worldwide. Only the United States deploys more military personnel in the field than the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. There is therefore still a long way to go before multilateralism is the most commonly used form of conflict resolution.

In 2005 alone, UN peacekeeping operations rotated 161,386 military and police personnel, made 864 flights into or out of the field, and carried 271,651 cubic meters of cargo.

The actions of peacekeepers are usually effective. Since 1945, UN peacekeepers have undertaken 60 field missions and negotiated 172 peace settlements that have not only ended regional conflicts, but also enabled people in more than 45 countries to take part in free and fair elections.

In 2005, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations successfully completed peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste, and fulfilled its mandate of helping to establish domestic institutions and providing these as yet fragile societies with the opportunity to establish lasting peace.

Private Members' Business

●(1805)

Demining operations managed by the UN Mine Action Service, part of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, facilitate the deployment of peacekeepers to Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan.

In terms of security, recent peacekeeping missions have been carried out in some of the most difficult and least governed areas ever encountered by international missions. These operations have provided practical assistance on the ground to extremely vulnerable populations. Peacekeepers are deployed to areas where others cannot or will not go and play a vital role by paving the way for the return to stability and, ultimately, for peace and long-term development.

There is also a clear correlation between the decrease in the number of civil wars and the increase in UN peacekeeping missions. The number of UN peacekeeping operations has more than quadrupled since the end of the Cold War. Since 1990, this renewed international activism has grown in scope and intensity, and the number of crises, wars and genocides has begun to diminish accordingly.

In addition to peacekeeping and security, the peacekeeping forces have, with increasing frequency, been responsible for supporting political processes, building legal systems, creating law enforcement and police forces, and disarming former combatants. For example, through their disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program, the United Nations mission in Sierra Leone alone has destroyed 42,330 weapons and more than 1.2 million bullets and shells. It has also disarmed 75,490 combatants, including 6,845 child combatants, and provided an allocation to and ensured the reintegration of nearly 55,000 veterans.

The United Nations mission in Timor-Leste has created a business women's group that trains women entering the public service and ensures that they are heard in the new government and structures of civil society. Today, women represent over 25% of parliamentarians in that country. That is one of the highest percentages of female parliamentarians in the world.

UN peacekeeping is cost-effective. A survey by Oxford University economists found that international military intervention under Chapter VII of the UN Charter—action taken when peace is under threat—is the most cost-effective means of reducing the risk of conflict in post-conflict societies.

The approved Department of Peacekeeping Operations budget for the period from July 1, 2005, to June 30, 2006, was approximately \$5 billion. This represents 0.5% of global military spending. A study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office estimated that it would cost the U.S. about twice as much as the UN to conduct a peacekeeping operation similar to the UN stabilization mission in Haiti.

I will end here with those statistics and illustrations, because it has been proven that peacekeepers are a necessity and the Bloc Québécois is very proud of that.

●(1810)

[English]

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I, too, stand with great honour to support this initiative, this bill, and I thank the mover for following this initiative.

From time to time in this place we have initiatives on which everyone can agree, and I think we all welcome those opportunities. This day to honour peacekeepers is one initiative I fully support and I believe everyone in the House supports. It is one that is in step with what we all came here to do, which is to certainly represent our constituents, but to also represent what makes our country distinctive, what we can be proud of as Canadians.

Canadians, from time to time, are noted for being modest, which is a good thing, but there are times when we need to celebrate our history, our institutions and what makes us so different and unique.

It was the former prime minister, Lester B. Pearson, who came up with the idea, and if he were still living he would certainly say that he had a lot of help with the idea, but he clearly was the person who was able to capture the imagination at the right time to come up with a different way of solving conflict.

Hon. members will know their history. In 1956, when there was a problem in terms of how to deal with the Suez conflict and how to have a proper troop withdrawal at the time the French, British and Israeli troops were extricating themselves from Suez, the brilliant idea of peacekeepers came forward.

At the time, we were suffering from a lack of imagination about how to deal with conflicts. It was the post-World War II era. There were, quite frankly, conflicts similar to what is going on in the world now. We did not have the capacity, the ideas and the institutions to deal with conflicts in a creative way. It was in 1956 that the idea of what is really the first modern peacekeeping initiative took place. Lester B. Pearson was given the Nobel Peace Prize after that.

I honestly hope we figure out a way that this day, notwithstanding that it is in August, can be brought in to our school curriculums across the country.

I might add that if members have a chance, they should travel down Highway 7. Not far from Tweed is the Pearson Peace Park and the Pearson Peace Award is given out every year. Those are extremely important ideas and touchstones for our country. The Pearson Peacekeeping Centre is an important well from which to draw, particularly now.

It is important to note that many veterans are working in support of this. In fact, the Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association will be more than delighted to see this initiative. It happens to have its own mission statement: "To be a strong and leading advocate for all veterans, to create and nurture a forum of comradeship for veterans and to govern the CPVA democratically and effectively on behalf of all its members".

Private Members' Business

It does that because it wants to ensure that the idea of peacekeeping is not seen as something just thrown into the history books, that it is something that stays with us, that the important historical concept not only is referenced, but is something we employ.

I have to say that presently we are at a crossroads where we do need to invigorate our commitment to peacekeeping. We see that now and we know that Canada has, in terms of peacekeeping commitments, fallen behind. However, I will not get into a long discourse about that.

•(1815)

I think the idea of honouring peacekeepers might invigorate the debate about Canada's role in the world. There is no question that peacekeeping has changed. Things change and evolve, but the idea of having blue helmets resolving conflicts throughout the world and dealing with human security is an important one.

I want to reference an initiative that actually falls in line with honouring peacekeepers. It was something that was presented to the previous government but it still has merit. It is the idea of the United Nations emergency peace service, a proposal that is in keeping with our tradition of peacekeeping. The proposal is straightforward. It states that when we see a humanitarian crisis, such as a genocide or massive human rights abuses, we should have a United Nations emergency peace service, a rapid response to: first, take action to prevent war and dire threats to human security and rights; second, to offer secure emergency services to meet critical human needs; third, to maintain or reinstate law, order, penal and judicial processes with high professionalism and fairness; and fourth, to initiate peace building processes with focused incentives to restore hope for local people, their society and economy so they may have a promising future.

The UN emergency peace service proposal would be designed to provide a rapid response to these needs. It would possess five unique strengths. It would be permanent and based at UN designated sites, including mobile field headquarters, and be able to act immediately to cope with an emergency. The proposal goes on to talk about all the other things the service could do.

The proposal of having a United Nations emergency peace service is to take the concept that is a Canadian one of peacekeeping, and see it evolve. It needs to be resourced and to be given a little more permanence and structure but it is something that would honour the history and veterans of our peacekeepers.

It is an idea that has been discussed. I know that Dr. Peter Langille, who is presently with an organization called Global Common Security, which happens to be here in Ontario, has promoted the idea. He has worked with other stakeholders.

It would be interesting to take this opportunity for a peacekeeping day to have a conference on the idea of a United Nations emergency peace service to see if we can engage not only our government but other stakeholders in the possibility of doing that.

It is a terrific idea and I hope it is one that we can use to leverage more support for the idea of peacekeeping so that it does not become a footnote in our history books but it becomes a very robust and important institution that we have for our present day.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there are members here who indicated they have membership in the Royal Canadian Legion in some form or another. I am very pleased to second this bill to establish a National Peacekeepers' Day on August 9 of every year.

Indeed, 120,000 Canadians have been killed in conflicts since World War I. This includes several hundred peacekeepers who have been killed serving Canada and the world in this capacity.

I congratulate the hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking for recognizing our Canadian peacekeepers who have earned the respect and admiration of the international community. His speech was as erudite and articulate as ever.

This bill is a continuation of our strong support for veterans across our country.

I was honoured to speak at the Thunder Bay South cenotaph ceremony and then I visited five other legions across my riding. For those who may not be aware, that is about a 1,000 kilometre round trip.

As we discuss Canada's role in Afghanistan, it is especially appropriate to remind ourselves that peacekeeping is an honourable aspiration for us and brings us to the point of our current role in the world. That we support our combat troops in Afghanistan is unequivocal. Their end goal, as mentioned, is peace.

Is there an expanded role for Canada's military in this troubled world?

Recently I was one of two Canadian members of Parliament who were part of the team to ratify the compact with Iraq in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. Besides the secretary general of the United Nations, the prime minister of Iraq, Condoleezza Rice of the United States, there were many other presidents and heads of state representing 80 countries. Canada is very fortunate to have a capable team in its foreign affairs department, and thus most of the hard negotiations had already occurred.

Canada has contributed \$300 million to assist in five areas, including: security reform, such as training police; governance in electoral processes; humanitarian assistance, such as landmine removal; basic social and economic needs, such as safe water and new classrooms; and democratic development, such as building a free press.

Although our participation in Iraq is minor, it is a chance for us to reaffirm our role as independent peacemakers. Several diplomats told me off the record that Canada's role has been diminished by our doing whatever the president of the United States tells us to do. Canada has a way to go to restore the damage this has inflicted on our reputation.

These meetings set in motion a process to help rebuild Iraq into a free and democratic nation. As with all peacekeeping, there can be no illusions about how difficult and lengthy this process can be, but this is a model that can serve to restore freedom to other oppressed countries. The reconstruction of Europe, Japan, and more recently Croatia, are examples of what can be achieved through sincere international cooperation.

What troubled me the most as I discussed our role in the world was the loss of our neutrality by snuggling up too closely to the United States. This has cost us, in some measure, our position as a peacemaker in the world. Some say they agree with this and that might sound acceptable, except I truly believe that the world needs more negotiators, arbitrators and neutral referees to settle these conflicts.

Our loss of status by becoming a mini clone can only be overcome by asserting ourselves as a nation that knows its own mind as a sovereign country. We used to be the country the rest of the world trusted because we were independent thinkers. We do not need to be in lockstep with the United States. In fact, we are undermining our own foreign service by becoming essentially parrots of American foreign policy.

We do value our relationship with the United States, but if we do not make our policies as an independent free nation, we lose the respect of the rest of the world. Americans are our best friends and great neighbours, but I believe they also want to respect our sovereignty.

•(1820)

The representatives at Sharm el-Sheikh described the importance of these conferences, “that finding stability in Iraq is the key to world peace”. Many leaders of national delegations stated frequently that these were historic meetings that could only come about as a result of people who do peacekeeping. Yet Canada did not even send a senior minister and my job as an observer was to study and report. I returned to Canada quite troubled by the loss of reputation. People representing other countries asked me what has happened to Canada.

To wrap up, a National Peacekeepers' Day will be part of the process of restoring our national pride as we honour those who died in the cause of peace and those who continue to strive to make our world a safer place.

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleagues who spoke this evening. They all spoke eloquently and I appreciate that they spoke in favour of this private member's bill.

I would like to use my concluding few moments to thank, as I thank all the members of this House, the veterans affairs committee for its support. It took its responsibilities seriously when Bill C-287 was on its agenda. We had a good discussion and some very helpful changes were made. I appreciate that.

I also want to thank the member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River who was the seconder at third reading.

I want to underline that this is another way to say that we support our troops. It is a way of saying that Canada's role in the world, while not easy in terms of its military presence, is not easy to define.

Adjournment Proceedings

If we start from the premise that we are at our core peacemakers and peacekeepers, and however we define what a peacekeeper is, if we start out from that philosophical premise, from that spirit, then we will ultimately do the right thing.

I wish to pay homage to the veterans in my own riding and the ridings of all of my colleagues, and especially aboriginal veterans who have often been unsung heroes in Canadian military history. I just want to remind the House that our job is to represent everyone, not just those who voted for us, but between elections everyone in our ridings. We have people on all sides of the spectrum. If there is one thing we can agree on, it is that as our country moves forward and as our quality of life improves, it is incumbent upon us to do what we can to share our values, our wealth and our vision.

Through our peacekeeping efforts, whether they are through the military or whether they are through our NGO communities, our police forces, our diplomatic corps, in all ways we are serving our children and our grandchildren, indeed the future generations who will depend upon how we conduct our business at this point in the history of the country.

I look forward to a successful vote in the near future.

•(1825)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It being 6:30 p.m., the time provided for debate has expired.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

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

Some hon. members: Yea.

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

Some hon. members: Nay.

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

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Pursuant to Standing Order 98, the recorded division stands deferred until Wednesday, November 21, 2007 at the beginning of private members' business.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 is deemed to have been moved.

Adjournment Proceedings

[Translation]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to have some supplementary answers to the question I asked the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence two weeks ago, that is, on the Friday before the recess of the House.

Yesterday, when my hon. colleague from Marc-Aurèle-Fortin asked a similar question regarding the problem of tobacco smuggling in Canada, I was disappointed that the parliamentary secretary was still unable to answer the question or demonstrate that he truly understood the problem we were talking about.

It is even more surprising because he had nearly two weeks to do his homework, to examine the issue and provide us with a reasonable answer. Since he knew that I would be asking him for further clarifications here today, I imagine his staff must have had a few minutes to brief him, so he can finally answer our question.

As I said, obviously, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence did not understand the file we were talking about. However, tobacco companies, citizens and representatives of all kinds want to prevent smoking and are lobbying for action to tackle this problem. He should have known, first of all, that the main problem with tobacco smuggling has to do with the fact that it involves domestic smuggling.

In his responses to both my colleague from Marc-Aurèle-Fortin and me, the parliamentary secretary did his very best to talk about border services and customs seizures. The problem is not contraband getting through customs. That is not the issue. The problem is that cigarettes are being made on Canadian territory and, in most cases, are intended for distribution only within reserves to aboriginal people who have the right to consume them. However, they are being bought, distributed and consumed illegally outside of reserves.

Obviously, we will not catch these people at the border. These people are not involved in cross-border contraband operations. They are operating on our own soil. In light of that fact, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence's suggestion is a strange one. It makes me think of a police officer standing on a sidewalk in front of a bank, arms crossed, watching the street and thinking everything is under control while people are robbing the bank behind his back.

We must act. I hope that in the response the parliamentary secretary will provide shortly, he will show that he understands that the problem is not at the border, but on our own territory.

Something else I found surprising was that when I suggested the possibility of seizing vehicles belonging to people involved in contraband activities, he said that was not allowed. Yet the 2001 Excise Act enables police to seize a vehicle when they have reason to believe that it is involved in contraband activity. Here, we are talking about contraband activity taking place with the full knowledge of the general public. That makes it very easy for the police to know or have good reason to believe that a person has products intended for illegal sale, such as cigarettes, in his vehicle.

The government has the means to act, but will it?

● (1830)

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Jeanne-Le Ber for his contribution to this important debate. I would like to respond to his statements.

[English]

I rise in response to the question and I may not be the correct parliamentary secretary, but I will have to do.

I would like to highlight that the government recognizes the impact that illicit tobacco manufacturing sales have on Canada's economic security and on the health of Canadians. Tackling crime and ensuring Canadians' health is a high priority for our government. We are committed to keeping Canadians safe, including safe from illegal activity such as the tobacco trade.

While many people fail to recognize the sale of contraband tobacco as a serious crime, it can have a significant impact on economic security and public safety including public health.

We have taken several measures to help address the issues of contraband tobacco. At the border, and not just the border, we have begun arming border services officers and hiring an additional 400 border services guards. We have invested \$19.5 million in the RCMP integrated border enforcement teams strategically located along the border to disrupt cross border smuggling.

There is also activity with local police services in the communities. In fact, with funding from the 2006 budget the RCMP is adding another 70 customs and excise members between now and 2010. These new RCMP members will be strategically deployed to enhance enforcement of cross border crime including tobacco smuggling and illegal tobacco operations elsewhere. We have also increased audits of tobacco manufacturers and growers.

The RCMP conducts a wide array of enforcement activities to combat contraband tobacco in close cooperation with first nations police services, where a lot of the problem resides, the Canada Border Services Agency, as well as other domestic and U.S. law enforcement agencies, not just at the border.

Canadian law enforcement agencies are working hard to combat the trade in illicit tobacco by reducing both their supply and demand.

In addition, under the federal tobacco control strategy, the RCMP and CBSA have dedicated intelligence analysts and officers to closely monitor the illicit tobacco market. This information helps develop a complete picture of the illicit tobacco trade and helps identify the highest priority threats.

Adjournment Proceedings

AGRICULTURE

As the House may know, demand for illegal cigarettes remains strong despite the health and safety risks of such products. The RCMP is aware that illicit trade in tobacco products in Canada stems from a variety of sources and closely monitors emerging trends in the manufacture and sale of illicit cigarettes. The RCMP is working in close collaboration with law enforcement agencies on both sides of the border and in the local communities to combat illicit tobacco trade and related crimes.

As a result seizure levels are currently at their highest level since the early 1990s and are a direct result of successful operations conducted across the country. In 2006 more than 500,000 cartons of illicit tobacco products were seized along with vehicles, goods and money.

The RCMP strategy outlines concrete actions that are being undertaken over the next three years. These include: collaborating with domestic and U.S. partners to interdict key criminals and seize their proceeds of crime through innovative cooperative law enforcement models, and heightening awareness about the public safety and health consequences of the illicit tobacco trade, whether cross border or in the local communities.

These collaborative measures taken by the RCMP, CBSA and domestic and U.S. partners are concrete actions to reduce the availability and the demand for contraband tobacco products.

• (1835)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I want to say that my question was addressed to this parliamentary secretary because when I asked the question in this House, he replied. I am happy that some steps have been taken. The parliamentary secretary just said that cars have been seized.

What I would like to know is whether the government plans to make more systematic seizures by going into areas where this illegal trade is going on in the open, for example, in small shops at the side of the road, where people drive up, fill their trunk and leave. It is very easy to identify these people. Does the government plan to take real action and go further?

Because this trade has a huge impact. The loss of revenue for governments is in the order of \$1.6 billion. A lot could be done with that money.

[*English*]

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Mr. Speaker, the illegal tobacco trade is an important issue for the government. I agree with my hon. colleague that it is a difficult problem for police forces, whether it is at the border, the RCMP, or local forces, to catch some of the folks who are doing it in these local areas. All police forces, the RCMP and local forces, are stretched quite badly with respect to resources.

That is why we have increased the capacity of cross border agencies. We have increased the capacity of the RCMP. It is going to take a little time to do that. The size of the force has been allowed to degrade over a number of years. We are building that back up.

There will be a lot of cooperation, as there is today, and that will improve as forces have more resources, local and RCMP, to combat these kinds of activities and that will only improve as time goes on.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on November 2 I raised a very serious question with the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food on why the new government is failing to respond to the income crisis facing beef producers and cow-calf operators across this country.

Farmers in the beef industry are taking historic income losses, with prices at the farm gate absolutely tumbling into negative levels for the last several months. Many are faced with no choice but to attempt to refinance or even close down their farm operations and many are taking that option, which is very serious. These farmers are watching in fear and frustration as their life's work disintegrates before their very eyes and the government does nothing.

After I asked the question, the response I received from the Secretary of State (Agriculture) was nothing short of idiotic. The secretary of state showed absolute disrespect on the government's part for struggling farmers, farmers losing their life's work because of events beyond their control, farmers who put high quality food on Canadian tables, farmers who are the key generators of wealth for all others in the food chain, and farmers who contribute to export dollars and Canada's positive balance of trade.

I would hope the parliamentary secretary tonight, on behalf of the government, has some positive program and financial dollars to announce for suffering beef and hog farmers in this country.

How serious is the crisis? As one producer in my riding told me, for several months now he has been losing \$20,000 in equity every week as the dollar goes up in value. Another sold cattle for \$1,400 per animal in April and in October for \$900. We certainly have not seen prices come down on consumer shelves.

Fed steer prices in Alberta fell by 13% in the last eight months while costs rapidly escalated. It has been noted that 40% of the cow-calf herd operators in Alberta could be out of business by Christmas. Bred cows are being sold at disaster prices, if they can sell at all, at between \$300 and \$700. This is a nationwide disaster and the government has a responsibility to act.

These are not just numbers. These are people. These are farmers. These are people who live in communities and are in serious financial trouble while the Government of Canada sits on huge surpluses. In fact, many are saying that this income crisis is worse than that caused by the closing of the border when we were struck by BSE.

However, during the BSE crisis cattle producers had the support and understanding of the Canadian public. It is not the same today and there is a huge difference in Ottawa. During BSE farmers had a government that cared and acted while the new government seems struck by inaction at best and incompetence at worst.

Adjournment Proceedings

Just to emphasize how governments can respond, let me draw a comparison when BSE happened. The previous government acted. Yes, there was CAIS, but it was inadequate to do the job and instead of using safety nets as a crutch for inaction as the new government is doing, the minister of the day, Andy Mitchell, acted with the following: \$520 million for the BSE recovery program, \$200 million for the cull animal program, \$680 million for the transitional industry support program and 10 others—

• (1840)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, agriculture is a big job and the minister comes to it with a bedrock principle: in making every decision on every policy, he is fully committed to putting farmers first.

In fact, since taking office, the government has announced a number of programs that will benefit farmers and processors. For instance, we have spent \$3.9 million in support of packing plants. Our government is contributing \$2.3 million for the disposal of specified risk material.

The government has also eased labour shortages in processing plants. We gave \$51 million to improve the temporary foreign workers program.

What is more, our government, along with the provincial governments, is providing \$130 million to minimize the costs of Canada's enhanced feed ban.

We are working with industry to come up with solutions that will meet its needs.

The national Beef Industry Value Chain Roundtable continues to work hard to address the various competitive challenges.

Because we put farmers first, targeted advanced payments are starting to flow. This will give farmers much needed cash.

In January, \$600 million for NISA-type programs will come into play. As we know, farmers have requested this type of payment since the previous Liberal government scrapped NISA.

The federal government is providing carefully planned and strategically implemented support to the beef industry. Support must be provided based on a viable plan to ensure a sustainable future. Discussions are continuing with provincial governments to consider ways in which the federal and provincial governments can work with the industry to support viability and prosperity.

Our record is very clear. We put farmers first and we provide results.

However, that member has some serious explaining to do. Let me just remind the House of the record of the member for Malpeque. In 2001, he voted against \$400 million for farm family emergency aid. In 2002, he was too afraid to stand up to American protectionist policies. In 2004, he voted against providing help for farmers hard

hit by BSE. In 2006, he voted against accountability at the Wheat Board.

Under what authority does that member stand up in this House to lecture this government?

Clearly, this government has the interests of farmers in mind. We put farmers first.

• (1845)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary and the government can attack me if they like, but the fact of the matter is that the government is failing the beef industry in this country and the parliamentary secretary knows it. With huge surpluses, beef producers need an immediate cash payment and they need it now.

I would suggest that the little list that he went through is an absolute pittance in terms of what this industry needs. This industry is in disaster and the government is failing the industry. The Canadian Cattlemen's Association had a number of suggestions.

I am saying, number one, that we need an ad hoc payment and we need it today.

The Canadian Cattlemen's Association also talked about the need to lower the Bank of Canada interest rates. That has to be done.

The association said there needs to be changes to CAIS to ensure national uniformity and greater responsiveness to rapid change in currency values. That needs to be done.

The association said we need to decouple the cash advances from CAIS. That needs to be done. It said we need—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Mr. Speaker, the old adage “the truth hurts” comes to mind. This government is working with industry for results that meet its needs. We have listened to farmers and we are acting, unlike the previous Liberals. The throne speech gave more to farmers than the Liberals ever gave.

We are working with the beef round table for concrete solutions. We are also working with the provincial governments. In fact, the minister is on his way to meet the provincial ministers of agriculture as we speak.

We have eased labour shortages in packing plants.

In summary, let me reiterate: we in this government put farmers first.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted.

Adjournment Proceedings

[*English*]

(The House adjourned at 6:47 p.m.)

Accordingly the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

CONTENTS

Thursday, November 15, 2007

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

Government Response to Petitions

Mr. Lukiwski 895

Committees of the House

Procedure and House Affairs

Mr. Goodyear 895

Mr. Goodyear 895

Motion for concurrence 895

(Motion agreed to) 895

Petitions

Income Trusts

Mr. Szabo 895

Taxation

Ms. Chow 895

Young Offenders Act

Mr. Komarnicki 895

Questions on the Order Paper

Mr. Lukiwski 895

Questions Passed as Orders for Returns

Mr. Lukiwski 897

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Canada Elections Act

Bill C-6. Second reading 897

Mr. Paquette 897

Mr. Godfrey 899

Ms. Ratansi 900

Mr. Godfrey 900

Mr. Hawn 901

Mr. Cardin 901

Mr. Lunn 902

Ms. Ratansi 902

Mr. Goodyear 903

Mr. Warawa 903

Mr. Bigras 903

Mrs. Yelich 905

Mr. Godfrey 905

Mr. Harvey 905

Ms. Beaumier 906

Mr. Silva 906

Mrs. Yelich 907

Mr. Norlock 908

Ms. Beaumier 908

Mrs. Yelich 909

Mr. Pallister 909

Mr. Cardin 909

Mrs. Yelich 911

(Motion agreed to, bill read the second time and referred to a committee) 911

Canada Elections Act

Mr. Blackburn (for the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform) 911

Bill C-18. Second reading 911

Mr. Lukiwski 911

Mr. Bagnell 914

Ms. Crowder 914

Mr. Komarnicki 915

Mr. Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe) 915

Mr. Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe) 916

Mr. Hawn 918

Ms. Chow 919

Ms. Picard 919

Ms. Chow 920

Ms. Bonsant 921

Mr. Bigras 921

Ms. Crowder 922

Ms. Davies 924

Mr. Bevington 925

Mr. Del Mastro 925

Mr. Bellavance 925

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Sinclair Cutcliffe

Mr. Easter 926

Democratic Reform

Mr. Stanton 927

International Day of Tolerance

Ms. Deschamps 927

Youth Rendez-vous

Mr. Godin 927

Alberta Diabetes Institute

Mr. Jaffer 927

Income Trusts

Mr. McCallum (Markham—Unionville) 927

Project Red Ribbon

Mrs. Davidson 928

Anti-Doping

Mr. Malo 928

Project Red Ribbon

Mr. Kramp 928

Family Violence Prevention Month

Mr. Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe) 928

Bloc Québécois

Mr. Lebel 929

Public Safety

Ms. Davies 929

Committees of the House	
Mr. Boshcoff	929
Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs	
Ms. Picard	929
Airbus	
Mr. Murphy (Charlottetown)	929
Liberal Party of Canada	
Mr. Lake	930

ORAL QUESTIONS

Airbus	
Mr. Goodale	930
Mr. Harper	930
Mr. Goodale	930
Mr. Harper	930
Mr. Goodale	930
Mr. Harper	930
Ms. Robillard	930
Mr. Day	931
Ms. Robillard	931
Mr. Day	931
Mr. Duceppe	931
Mr. Harper	931
Mr. Duceppe	931
Mr. Harper	931
Mr. Guimond	931
Mr. Harper	931
Mr. Mulcair	931
Mr. Day	931
Mr. Mulcair	931
Mr. Harper	932
Mr. Thibault (West Nova)	932
Mr. Day	932
Mr. Thibault (West Nova)	932
Mr. Day	932
Mr. Rodriguez	932
Mr. Day	932
Mr. Rodriguez	932
Mr. Day	932
Afghanistan	
Mr. Bachand	932
Mr. Bernier	933
Mr. Bachand	933
Mr. Bernier	933
Manufacturing Sector	
Mr. Crête	933
Mr. Menzies	933
Mr. Crête	933
Mr. Menzies	933
Government Contracts	
Mr. Russell	933
Mr. Day	933
Mr. Russell	934

Mr. Day	934
Afghanistan	
Mr. Coderre	934
Mr. MacKay	934
Mr. Coderre	934
Mr. Bernier	934
Aboriginal Affairs	
Mr. Harris	934
Mr. Strahl	934
Afghanistan	
Ms. Black	935
Mr. Bernier	935
Ms. Black	935
Mr. Bernier	935
Mr. McGuinty	935
Mr. Bernier	935
Mr. McGuinty	935
Mr. Bernier	935
Royal Canadian Mounted Police	
Ms. Brown (Oakville)	935
Mr. Day	935
Ms. Brown (Oakville)	935
Mr. Day	936
Status of Women	
Ms. Demers	936
Ms. Verner	936
Ms. Demers	936
Ms. Verner	936
Aboriginal Affairs	
Ms. Keeper	936
Mr. Strahl	936
The Economy	
Mr. Van Kesteren	936
Mr. Prentice	936
Royal Canadian Mounted Police	
Ms. Priddy	937
Mr. Day	937
Ms. Priddy	937
Mr. Day	937
Aboriginal Affairs	
Mr. Bagnell	937
Mr. Strahl	937
The Environment	
Mr. Wallace	937
Mr. Baird	937
Maher Arar	
Mr. Casey	938
Mr. Day	938
Presence in Gallery	
The Speaker	938
Business of the House	
Mr. Goodale	938
Mr. Van Loan	938

Ms. Davies 938

Canada Elections Act

Bill C-18. Second reading 939
Mr. Guimond 939
Ms. Bell (Vancouver Island North) 940
Mr. Goodyear 942
Mr. Siksay 943
Mr. Bagnell 943
Mr. Goodyear 944
Mr. Siksay 945
Mr. Laframboise 945
Mr. Christopherson 948
Mr. Dewar 949
Mr. Bevington 949
Mr. Hawn 951
Mr. Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe) 951
Mrs. Hinton 952
Mr. Siksay 952
Mr. Dewar 952
Mr. Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe) 955
Ms. Savoie 956

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

National Peacekeepers' Day Act

Mr. St. Denis 956
Bill C-287. Third reading 956
Mr. Hawn 958
Mr. Sweet 958
Mrs. Hinton 958
Mr. Nadeau 960
Mr. Dewar 961
Mr. Boshcoff 962
Mr. St. Denis 963
Division on motion deferred 963

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

Public Safety

Mr. St-Cyr 964
Mr. Hawn 964

Agriculture

Mr. Easter 965
Mr. Lauzon 966

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Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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