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Thursday, March 8, 2012

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, March 8, 2012

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*English*]

PUBLIC SECTOR INTEGRITY COMMISSIONER

The Speaker: I have the honour pursuant to section 38 of the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act to lay upon the table the special report of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner concerning an investigation into a disclosure of wrongdoing.

[*Translation*]

This report is deemed permanently referred to the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

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[*English*]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

ACCESS TO INFORMATION, PRIVACY AND ETHICS

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the first report of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics in relation to its study of the access to information dispute and the resulting court actions concerning CBC.

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to this report. However, notwithstanding the deadline of 120 days stipulated in Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the comprehensive response to this report be tabled within 60 days of the presentation of the report to the House.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague just tabled a report by the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics concerning CBC. Pursuant to Standing Order 35(2), I will take a few minutes this morning to briefly explain the dissenting opinion we included in the report.

Following a study undertaken by the Conservatives in committee, several principles underlying our parliamentary system were

challenged. Allow me to explain. We were very concerned by the questionable procedures the committee employed for this study, including the adoption of a government motion to require that redacted and unredacted documents at the heart of a legal conflict be reviewed by committee members. This motion overstepped the boundaries of a Commons committee's jurisdiction.

A legal opinion provided by Rob Walsh, retired law clerk and parliamentary counsel, reinforced our concern about this procedure. He noted the political nature of the study, which was being carried out at the same time as a case being heard independently by the court. He said:

A House Committee should not, in my view, take on the role of a court—or even appear to take on the role of a court—by addressing whether particular actions taken by a party are permissible under the Act. To do so is to encroach upon—or to appear to encroach upon—the constitutional function of the courts. Such an encroachment would offend the separation of powers between the judicial and legislative functions and possibly call into question the validity of ETHI's proceedings.

We firmly believe that the Conservatives have exceeded their authority in committee to the point of challenging certain fundamental principles of our political system.

I am pleased to have had this opportunity to talk about our dissenting opinion today.

[*English*]

GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND ESTIMATES

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fifth report of the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates in relation to its study of the supplementary estimates (C) for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2012.

I am pleased to report that the committee considered a vote under Privy Council and reports the same to the House.

* * *

[*Translation*]

STATUS OF WOMEN CANADA ACT

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-406, An Act respecting the mandate of Status of Women Canada.

She said: Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to wish a happy International Women's Day to all my female colleagues in the House.

Routine Proceedings

I have the great honour to introduce this bill on the mandate of Status of Women Canada. This is a goal that I have been working toward for many years so far—since 2004, in fact, when I began my political career. It has not yet been achieved. Status of Women Canada deserves to be a stand-alone department so that it can fulfill its mandate.

This is 2012, and if anyone in this House wants to try to prove to me that gender equality has been achieved, I am prepared to debate with that person any time, anywhere, for as long as it takes, because that is completely untrue.

I sincerely believe that the mandate of Status of Women Canada must be enhanced and that it must be made a separate department that would be in a position to promote and coordinate policy related to gender equality. It should also promote the full participation of women in the economic, social, cultural and political life of the country. It should work with the federal government to ensure that women are equally represented and that gender-based analysis is truly implemented and is not just a concept that is added as an afterthought to the end of a bill. Programs must be truly equal and must remain that way. Status of Women Canada must support programs that promote the status of women and the organizations that work in this field, particularly those that focus on research and advocacy, since so much of their funding has been cut over the past few years. Finally, this department must be able to maintain an active dialogue with stakeholders from all areas related to the status of women.

If the hon. members in this House truly believe in gender equality, I hope that they will support this bill.

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

* * *

[*English*]

FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATION ACT

Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-407, An Act to amend the Financial Administration Act (gender balanced representation).

She said: Mr. Speaker, I would add my congratulations to all women on this International Women's Day.

Volunteerism is a wonderful thing in all of our communities but it does not promote the equality of women, which is the reason for my bill. It would require that federally regulated boards be made up of at least 40% women.

The reality is there is a growing body of research that shows that gender-diverse corporate boards are more effective, perform better, access the widest talent pool, are more responsive to the market and lead to better decision-making.

Because women are active participants in the democratic governing of the country, both as voters and as politicians, they should have balanced representation in the management of crown corporations.

According to a report from the United Nations on the status of women, there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that

investing in women and girls has a multiplier effect on productivity, efficiency and sustained economic growth.

The reality is that, despite our best efforts in regard to federal organizations, only 32.43% of those boards have women as active members despite the fact that women make up 47% of the workforce.

We have been criticized quite significantly by the United Nations in terms of CIDA because we have not promoted the equality of women. Many industrialized countries have enacted legislation to achieve gender parity. Countries such as Switzerland, Norway and Spain have passed a law requiring that women's representation on boards reach 40% within the next six years.

We have a lot of catching up to do and this bill aims to help Canada to move in a positive direction.

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

* * *

• (1010)

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there have been discussions among all the parties and I believe if you seek it you would find unanimous consent for the following motion:

That, at the conclusion of today's debate on the opposition motion in the name of the member for Hamilton Centre, all questions necessary to dispose of this motion be deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred until Monday, March 12, at the end of government orders.

The Speaker: Does the hon. opposition whip have the unanimous consent of the House to propose this motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: The House has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

PETITIONS

ASBESTOS

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present a petition signed by literally tens of thousands of Canadians who call upon Parliament to take note that asbestos is the greatest industrial killer that the world has ever known and that Canada remains one of the largest producers and exporters of asbestos in the world even though more Canadians now die from asbestos than all other industrial causes combined. They also point out that Canada spends millions of dollars subsidizing the asbestos industry and blocking international efforts to curb its use.

Therefore, the petitioners pray that the Government of Canada should ban asbestos in all of its forms and institute a just transition program for asbestos workers and the communities they live in; end all government subsidies of asbestos, both in Canada and abroad; and stop blocking international health and safety conventions designed to protect workers from asbestos, such as the Rotterdam Convention.

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with pleasure that I bring forward a petition from individuals who have expressed their concern with regard to the announcement by the Minister of Immigration on November 4, 2011, to have super visas wherein individuals could get a 10-year multiple entry visa. However, only a few weeks later, the minister established an eligibility criteria for a super visa which disqualified potentially thousands of families from being reunited.

The petitioners are calling on the Minister of Immigration to take corrective action to improve the super visa criteria to enable individuals of all economic strata to have their parents be able to come to Canada to visit for important engagements, whether that be for a funeral, wedding, graduation or any other important reason for people to want to come and visit with family in Canada.

POVERTY

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have three petitions to present.

The first petition is signed by a variety of people asking the House to adopt Bill C-233, an act to eliminate poverty in Canada.

The petitioners indicate that poverty affects over 10% of Canadians and disproportionately affects aboriginal peoples, recent immigrants, people with disabilities, youth and children. They also say that Canada ranks far behind most other developed countries in the extent of poverty among working adults and children.

Finally, Bill C-233 would require the federal government to develop and implement a strategy for poverty elimination in consultation with provincial, territorial, municipal and aboriginal governments and with civil society organizations.

• (1015)

CANADA-EU TRADE AGREEMENT

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is in regard to the Canada-EU comprehensive economic and trade agreement.

The petitioners indicate that most of what we know about the CIDA negotiations comes from leaked copies of the draft agreement and closed communications with various Canadian and European government officials, which is unacceptable for an agreement as wide and deep in scope as this one.

Therefore, the petitioners request that the Government of Canada and the provincial and territorial governments immediately cease negotiations with the EU while nationwide public consultations can be held on how and whether or not to proceed with the potential trade agreement.

CHILD CARE

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is quite appropriate that I am tabling this final petition on International Women's Day.

The petitioners say that child care is often not acceptable or affordable for Canadian families and is often of uncertain quality for young children. They say that child care creates jobs, makes Canada

Routine Proceedings

more competitive, helps achieve women's equality, builds local economies and is a recognized human right.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons to legislate the right to universal access to child care and provide multi-year funding to provincial and territorial governments to build a national system of affordable, high quality, public and not for profit early childhood education and care accessible to all children.

The federal government must establish funding criteria and reporting mechanisms that ensure accountability for how the provinces and territories use federal funding to ensure quality, accessibility, universality and accountability and that acknowledges Quebec's right to develop social programs with adequate compensation from the federal government.

FOREIGN AID

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have two petitions this morning. The first is from people in my riding who petition the Government of Canada to protect foreign aid spending.

The undersigned residents wish to bring to the attention of the government that departments have been asked to table plans for savings of 5% to 10% in preparation for the budget and that the Canadian International Development Agency accounts for only 2% of the federal budget, the budget which has been frozen for two years, which they say results in an actual cut of 5% in real terms when measured against inflation.

They indicate that CIDA's work results in substantial improvements in the lives of many of the world's poorest people. It goes toward training teachers in regions with limited education, improving health care and providing access to clean water. Moreover, they say that many non-governmental organizations in the development sector depend on CIDA as a source of funds in order to run their own programs.

The petition is from youth organized through Memorial University of Newfoundland Oxfam group. The petitioners say that while youth are suffering from the recession in Canada, they still support a strong foreign aid budget and call upon government to exempt CIDA from the budget cuts in the new budget to come down.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition, which is one of many petitions we have received so far on this issue, calls on the government to reverse the decision to close the Newfoundland and Labrador marine rescue coordination centre in St. John's and to reinstate staff and services. They oppose this decision because they believe that the government should understand and acknowledge that the closure will result in the suffering of services and will put lives at risk.

Routine Proceedings

There is a huge proportion of distress incidents in Canada, the largest in this region, responding to an average of 500 incidents per year and saving over 600 people in distress. The results, though, are due to the unique knowledge and understanding of the area of ocean and the people involved. That is very important to its protection.

[*Translation*]

SHARK FINNING

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise here this morning to present three petitions.

The first petition comes from residents primarily in the Vancouver area of British Columbia and deals with the issue of shark finning. The removal of the fin of the shark for no purpose other than to prepare a particularly rare soup is leading to the annihilation of a species. Nearly 70 million sharks are killed every year for this reason.

The petitioners are calling on the House of Commons to ban the possession, trade, distribution and sale of shark fins in Canada.

• (1020)

[*English*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition comes from residents from across Canada on the subject of the proposed Enbridge pipeline across northern British Columbia to Kitimat and the breaking of a 40-year moratorium against oil supertankers. This petition urges the government to await evidence before taking a position.

BOTTLED WATER

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the last petition is from residents in my riding from Pender Island, Galiano Island and Salt Spring Island. They point out that Parliament should stop the practice of providing bottled water within this institution. The petition ties in slightly with an important bill that we will be debating later today on banning bulk water exports. I certainly hope to speak to that bill, Bill C-267.

SENIORS' POVERTY

Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition from a number of Canadians who recognize that in June the House unanimously passed a motion presented by me that the government take action to raise all seniors out of poverty by increasing the guaranteed income supplement. Of course, we know that has not happened. The government's efforts in this area have been less than acceptable.

As today is International Women's Day, it is appropriate to present this petition because most of those seniors living in poverty are single women who have no access to resources and desperately need that increase in the GIS.

The petitioners call upon the government to honour the motion that was passed in June and increase the guaranteed income supplement enough to lift every senior out of poverty.

CANADA-U.S. EXTRADITION TREATY

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the pleasure to present two petitions today.

The first petition concerns the matter of John Graham who was extradited to the U.S. over 35 years ago for a murder that was committed in South Dakota. These petitions are being collected by the John Graham Defense Committee located in Vancouver. The petitioners feel very strongly about this issue, as do many people.

The petitioners are calling for the immediate release and return of John Graham to Canada. They call on the Government of Canada to make a formal request to the U.S. for his return. They are also calling for a congressional investigation into the FBI's handling of the murder investigation, as well as an amendment to the extradition treaty between Canada and the U.S. to protect the rights of Canadian citizens from extradition based on hearsay evidence alone.

CANADA CONSUMER PRODUCT SAFETY ACT

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition contains pages and pages of signatures of petitioners, many from Vancouver, Vancouver Island and Ontario. I have presented many of these petitions before. They reflect the deeply held concern by many Canadians that every year hundreds of thousands of dogs and cats are brutally slaughtered for their fur in a number of regions.

Canada should join the U.S., Australia and the European Union in banning the import and sale of dog and cat fur. Further, it should be mandatory that all fur products being imported or sold in Canada have a label identifying the species of origin.

The petitioners call on the Government of Canada to introduce and support government legislation to amend the Canada Consumer Product Safety Act and the Textile Labelling Act.

[*Translation*]

FIREARMS REGISTRY

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today being International Women's Day, I am honoured to present a petition calling on the House to withdraw Bill C-19 to eliminate the gun registry, which, as we all know, will have adverse consequences for health and public safety, not to mention the fact that it is a terrible waste of taxpayers' dollars.

This petition, with several pages of signatures, is the initiative of women's organizations in the greater Quebec City region, including Violence Info, Centre de ressources pour femmes de Beauport, Centre femmes d'aujourd'hui, and Viol Secours.

I wish to congratulate those women on their hard work and thank them for all the services they provide to women.

Business of Supply

[English]

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

● (1025)

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP) moved:

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should, within six months, table amendments to the Elections Canada Act and other legislation as required that would ensure that in all future election campaigns: (a) Elections Canada investigation capabilities be strengthened, to include giving the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request all necessary documents from political parties to ensure compliance with the Elections Act; (b) all telecommunication companies that provide voter contact services during a general election must register with Elections Canada; and (c) all clients of telecommunication companies during a general election have their identity registered and verified.

He said: Mr. Speaker, with your permission, I would seek to share my time with the magnificent deputy critic, the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent.

The motion is in three parts. As I only have 10 minutes, I will deal with the first part and look to my colleagues from our magnificent caucus to shore us up on the rest of the motion over the course of the day.

It has been interesting to listen to the various responses of the government on this matter, beginning early last week when the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent and I asked questions about it. We were not even given the decency of an answer that dealt with this issue. Then the government said there was no real issue. We told the government that what it agreed to in the majority report of the committee is as good if not better. Last night, I was on a CPAC panel with the member for Peterborough, who is the designated point person for the government on this file. He said that the Chief Electoral Officer does not need this power because he already has it. We have been all around on this issue with the government.

It would seem there was a moment of clarity yesterday, however, when the Prime Minister acknowledged that his government was prepared to support this motion. At least that is our interpretation of his remarks but it remains to be seen what the government's actions will be today. If the government does support this motion, then within six months we expect to have legislation in front of us that deals with parts (a), (b) and (c) of the motion.

With respect to the first part of the motion, the government is alleging that the Chief Electoral Officer already has the powers that we are talking about, that there would be no change, which is why

the government would be willing to support the motion. I beg to differ big time.

I was present at the commencement of our review of the Chief Electoral Officer's report on October 7, 2010. We have been considering this report for two years. The Chief Electoral Officer only selected a few things to talk about at committee, those things that were the most important, one being political financing. In his opening remarks, he said:

My recommendations seek to balance two key objectives: trust and efficiency. To increase trust in the management of public funds, I am recommending greater transparency in the review process for the electoral campaign returns of political parties. If requested by the Chief Electoral Officer, parties would be required to provide [an] explanation or documents to support their election expenses, returns. This change would bring the requirements applying to parties more in line with the requirements that apply to candidates and leadership contestants.

On the same day and at the same meeting a question was posed by a former member of the House, whose name I will not mention because it is not necessary. During our public witness discussion, the member asked the Chief Electoral Officer:

I would like to discuss the part of your report entitled "Parties' Returns: Documentary Evidence". You would like to "Require the parties to provide, upon request, explanations or documents to support their election expenses returns." You say that the act does not authorize that, but that you can request it. We submit a report, and after that, you have the right to request documentary evidence.

What exactly are we talking about?

Mr. Mayrand replied:

I can request that evidence of the candidates, yes, but not of the political parties. That is the current inconsistency in the act. I don't have the authority to ask a political party to produce documentary evidence in support of expenses identified in the election expenses return.

What people may find interesting is that unlike all the other returns that were mentioned, the federal return from the party, the one on which the government's subsidies are based, currently requires no documentation. None. The Chief Electoral Officer is requesting that he be given the authority to request any documents that he would need to assure himself that parties are in compliance.

● (1030)

Further, on page 36 under II.1 of the Chief Electoral Officer's report to our committee, it states:

The Chief Electoral Officer has the mandate of ensuring that those returns comply with the requirements of the Act. However, despite these legislative requirements and the substantial public subsidies attached to them, the Chief Electoral Officer does not have any real means to ensure that parties' returns meet the requirements of the Act. This situation is particularly problematic when it comes to the election expenses return as parties may obtain a reimbursement for these expenses. Indeed, unlike candidates and other regulated entities, political parties are not required to provide any documentary evidence to support their returns.

The recommendation came to the committee and the committee in its majority—which means the government, because the only way to get a majority on a committee now is to have the government on side—rejected this and put a recommendation in the majority report which said that as an alternative, all parties should submit to and pay to have a compliance audit done.

Business of Supply

Keep in mind the \$1.7 million that Elections Canada spent on the in-and-out controversy where the government ultimately, after having dragged its heels and having gone through every legal means to slow the procedure, in the end pleaded guilty, gave the money back and altered the returns. Do people recall the images on TV of the raid and all the boxes being hauled out by the RCMP? All of that and that whole \$1.7 million had to be spent in part because the Chief Electoral Officer did not have the ability to put on a single piece of paper or in an email the documents he would like to see to satisfy himself that the Conservatives were in compliance. That is what we are talking about.

Over the last week or so, as this issue has started to permeate Canadians' awareness given all that is going on in the world, we are at the point where the official opposition, in order to deal with this issue directly and to deal with some of the matters surrounding the robocall scandal, has brought forward this motion which has three components. The other two components are to ensure that any firm doing telecommunications, meaning doing the robocalling, has to register and its clients have to be registered.

Those simple acts alone would go a long way to answering the questions that are currently swirling around the robocall scandal. Who authorized it? Who paid for it? Who actually did it? Where did the scripts come from? There is a whole host of questions to which we do not have answers. The government says it is going to comply with any documentary requests. I guess that suggests maybe this law is not needed. We take the government at its word, but it does not have a great track record of keeping its word, quite frankly, but we will see.

Nonetheless, we believe that this should be in place. I might add that later on there will be an amendment proposed. Of course, the mover of the motion has to agree to any amendments and I will agree to one which would give effect to the law for the Chief Electoral Officer not only for future elections, but on any current file that is in front of the Chief Electoral Officer.

At the end of the day, what is at risk is the respect of our democracy not just around the world, but more importantly, by Canadians. We believe that passing this motion and ordering that the government comply with bringing forward this legislation would go a long way to returning the faith Canadians want to have in their electoral system. I look forward to this motion I hope passing unanimously and having the full force of Parliament to send a message to Canadians that Parliament demands and will ensure clean, fair elections.

•(1035)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to clarify a misconception on the part of the NDP about compliance audits. In his report, the Chief Electoral Officer laid out two options for compliance audits. One was that his office would do all of the compliance audits to make sure that all registered federal political parties followed all of the election rules. The second was that the political parties would contract compliance audits. In other words, the political parties would bear the cost associated with compliance audits. We thought that was a reasonable suggestion. Why should the taxpayer foot the bill for something that political

parties were required to do? Federal parties are required to play by the rules. Why should they not be required to pay for audits?

To put it succinctly, we believe the political parties should bear the costs associated with compliance audits rather than the taxpayer. That is the difference between our two parties.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the tone of the hon. member. We have worked together on this file. We have a couple of disagreements, but there is a lot of respect in terms of the work we have done. However, I completely disagree with everything he just said.

If the government was so bloody concerned about taxpayers' money, why did it waste \$1.7 million of taxpayers' money on a file and an appeal that it eventually caved on anyway and pleaded guilty? It should not talk to us about caring about taxpayers' money.

I will quote two sentences directly from the Chief Electoral Officer's report. First, in terms of the approach that the Chief Electoral Officer wanted and the one that we are putting forward today, this is what he said the preferred option would be. He stated, "This approach would substantially enhance transparency and accountability, thus complementing the reforms adopted in 2003 and 2006".

Two, what did the Chief Electoral Officer say about the suggestion from the government and the position that is in the majority report? He stated, "This solution", meaning the Conservative solution, "would notably entail increased auditing costs for the parties and would require Elections Canada to issue guidelines for the accounting auditors".

If I get a chance, there is another part to that answer that I would love to give.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we know for a fact that Elections Canada has been contacted by well over 30,000 Canadians from coast to coast with regard to this robocall rigging or whatever one wants to call it. The essence of the story is that individuals were contacted. Some callers said they were from Elections Canada and advised people that their polling stations had changed. This would have caused many of them to possibly go to false polling stations, maybe giving up on voting because they found out that was not the place to go to. Some might have even been frustrated and had no intention to go. The idea was voter suppression to prevent people from voting. We are talking about thousands of people.

My question to the member is this. Does he believe, as I do, that this was not put together by one person? The government seems to be saying it was one person who needs to be held accountable for this. I am interested in what he believes is the case. Does he think this is coincidence or something that was orchestrated?

Business of Supply

•(1040)

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, I have to say on my own behalf that we do not yet have the truth. It seems hard to believe that there were potentially tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of calls made in the manner that we are hearing about and that it was all the result of one person. The hon. member, I am sure, is referring to other circumstances where the government has very quickly found a scapegoat somewhere to throw under the bus, saying it was a rogue person and that the government had nothing to do with it. The government might say that one bad apple in a big barrel is not a big surprise. However, we do not buy that for one minute. It does not look like Elections Canada is buying it and Canadians certainly are not.

The short answer to my colleague is yes, I agree this looks suspicious. It is very unlikely it was one rogue person. This was organized somewhere and paid for by more than just the one person who has been identified.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for Hamilton Centre for moving this motion today, because I think it is through initiatives like this that we will begin to restore a bit of confidence in our democratic institutions.

It is clear that the Conservative government is not Elections Canada's number one fan. Getting caught with one's hand in the cookie jar, as the Conservatives did in the in and out scandal, is certainly no fun. I think the Conservatives are upset with this independent agency for doing its job diligently and rigorously. In Italian this is called a vendetta.

It is ridiculous. Not so long ago, the solution for the Conservatives might have been simple: punish Elections Canada and ignore the requests for increased power from the people at Elections Canada in order to prevent Elections Canada from seeing the Conservatives getting into the cookie jar with impunity again.

But no. There has been a turn in events and by all accounts, the government will support the NDP motion. The Conservatives are finally listening to reason. That must also be why they have very discreetly dropped their appeal of the guilty verdict in the in and out scandal. I am not celebrating just yet. I will wait and see what happens when the motion is voted on. The 39th, 40th and 41st Parliaments should not go down in history as the parliaments when someone pulled a couple of fast ones on Canadian voters.

What the NDP is asking for is simple, and that is to update the Canada Elections Act so that the Chief Electoral Officer can have the means to check whether a general election or a byelection was held transparently, honestly and ethically. That is all. We want the Chief Electoral Officer to have the power to request all necessary documents from political parties to ensure compliance with the Canada Elections Act. We are also asking that all telecommunication companies that provide voter contact services during a general election register with Elections Canada and that their clients have their identity registered and verified. This will help prevent people who abuse our system from staying in the shadows. That is all.

But why is the NDP moving this motion in the House now, a few weeks the report on the 40th general election was studied? Well, it is because we now have another election controversy.

We have all heard about the robocall scandal and voter suppression tactics. I believe these allegations are serious and legitimate. And since this is also the opinion of the former chief electoral officer, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, I tend to take it seriously. Elections Canada received reports from 31,000 people regarding irregularities during the last election. The NDP wants Elections Canada to investigate. And the tools we want to give Elections Canada will help it get to the bottom of the matter. We are lucky to have an independent body that can objectively assess the electoral process and compliance with the Canada Elections Act.

At present, Elections Canada feels that it does not have adequate audit powers to do its job properly. We want to provide the necessary tools and, above all, the right tools for it to carry out its mandate. And these are the tools that the Chief Electoral Officer, not the opposition parties, is asking for. We want Elections Canada to be able to do its job effectively, under the best possible conditions. That is what the NDP is asking for in a nutshell. Furthermore, Elections Canada's provincial counterparts already have these powers. We really are not trying to reinvent the wheel here; this wheel already exists.

What saddens me most is that the robocall scandal is now being covered by media outside Canada. It has been reported on by the *New York Times* and the BBC. What must others think of us? Canada is renowned around the world for its solid democracy and is an important player in election monitoring in other countries. The objective of some CIDA development programs is to enhance electoral capacity. It is an almost absurd irony to be preaching about democratic electoral systems when we do not even give ourselves the tools to set a good example at home in Canada.

If the robocall controversy continues to prove to be one of the greatest affronts to the democratic traditions of this country, it will very seriously affect Canada's credibility abroad. Globalization and the increase in trade are fine and dandy, but the flip side to globalization is that information now circulates as freely as goods. What happens in Canada can be heard very clearly in Australia or South Africa.

The Ukrainians are coming to Canada to ask for help in developing and maintaining a democratic system in their country. This week, at the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, while the Ukrainian witnesses described the pitiful state of democracy as it is practised in Kiev, I could not help but think that the Ukrainians were coming to get help from a government that is itself perhaps fraudulent.

Business of Supply

•(1045)

If we allow this kind of fraud, we will no longer be in a position to give advice to anyone, and we will no longer be a democratic force in this world. Our credibility abroad is of serious concern to me. To begin with, we lost our seat on the United Nations Security Council, then we withdrew from the Kyoto protocol, an act that was greatly decried by the international community. Then Canada announced that the government intended to use information obtained through torture.

Now, Canada's reputation is being tarnished with allegations of electoral fraud. We would be doing ourselves a huge favour if we gave Elections Canada the tools it needed to do its work properly. We must also take care that the international community does not start to think that we are turning into a corrupt regime. If I have properly understood the Conservative government's position upon reviewing the "Report of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada on the 40th General Election", as regards the increased powers the Chief Electoral Officer is asking for, it would be preferable to call on an external auditor to review the books of a political party. One may as well ask the neighbour's wife's cousin's aunt, who is a good pal, to review one's books. It would be a lot simpler.

When Conservative members say that they are co-operating with Elections Canada, and yet refuse to give it increased powers, I wonder what they are trying to hide. This is not a game of catch me if you can, here. If a police officer investigates a bank robbery and does not have the power to question the main suspect—if the police officer cannot properly conduct his investigation—does he have to take the suspect at his word when he claims that nothing happened, and wait for somebody to make a confession?

The NDP motion is timely. Elections Canada must carry out a wide-reaching and in-depth investigation of robocalls and the dirty tricks involved in voter suppression. The motion is even more on the mark regarding the Conservative government's slashing of public funding to political parties. The role of political parties in our democratic system has just shifted. They have been turned into ruthless machines that sometimes use unscrupulous methods to fill their coffers.

La Presse published the story today about a Mr. Duke who was aggressively harassing voters to solicit donations on behalf of the Conservative Party. Dubious tactics continue to be the norm. If the Conservative Party's tactic is to disgust voters to the point that they will not go and vote and to reduce the turnout rate among people who do not support the party, I will let it take the fall for its actions. It is all very well to engage in marketing efforts to rename the government of Canada the "Harper government", but the fact is that people around the world will associate this scandal with that very "Harper government".

Many organizations support the direction the NDP is taking on this: Democracy Watch, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association and the Council of Canadians. The Conservatives have to stop taking Canadians for fools. People want a responsible, open and transparent government. They want a government that represents all Canadians, not just the ones who voted for their party.

I will conclude by saying that there is a very clear movement. I only hope that the Conservative government will not miss the boat, because the voters are going to remember this in 2015.

[*English*]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to go back to the audit function that I was discussing with my friend from Hamilton Centre just a few moments ago. I would point out, and it was confirmed by the latest intervention, that in the Elections Canada report, the Chief Electoral Officer said that he does not currently have the capacity to do compliance audits. Therefore, he would have to hire additional auditors.

Why does the Chief Electoral Officer have to do that, increasing the cost to taxpayers, when federal political parties could do the same thing on their own dime? I have already contacted several of the big six accounting firms, because one of the—

•(1050)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Cannot trust your audit?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, my friend from Malpeque is heckling again, but only because we have touched a nerve. They are a little sensitive when it comes to election returns over there in that corner of the House.

I have already contacted several of the big six accounting firms. They have said, as suspected, that as we speak they are already starting to engage some of their own staff to become conversant with elections law. They realize that federal parties will be requesting assistance from accounting firms. They will be fully conversant with elections law.

Why not let the parties pay for it, rather than the taxpayers?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his question.

If the Conservatives are so intent on protecting taxpayers' money, in particular when it comes to complying with the Canada Elections Act, I would like someone to explain to me why they are spending \$1.7 million on lawsuits that will ultimately be abandoned, when they have been found guilty of election fraud. That is ridiculous, to start with.

If we add to that the fact that political parties are going to have to pay a lot of money for the auditors who will confirm these things, and that at present, in all provinces, the chief electoral officers have the powers that the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada is asking for, we really cannot understand why, all of a sudden, what applies to the provinces is not good for Canada. The Conservatives really do not want the Chief Electoral Officer to have that power. I find it impossible to understand that, myself.

As well, we must not forget that what the Chief Electoral Officer was asking for was to have these powers generally, and not to audit each piece of paper. However, the external auditors are going to have to audit everything, and that will cost a lot more.

Business of Supply

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I enjoyed the remarks by the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent. We certainly welcome the motion.

However, is it not part of the problem and one reason that we need stronger enforcement of Election Canada's rules that we cannot get answers in the House? In the current episode of Conservative election fraud, we are getting the same kinds of lines from the current Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister as we did in the in and out scandal from the previous Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, the member for Nepean—Carleton.

I do not know whether the member was here, Mr. Speaker, but you will remember that was the case when we raised questions about the in and out scandal. The parliamentary secretary would get up and say "\$5,000 in, \$5,000 out", in and out, and all of them over there on the Conservative backbench would all smile and clap and cheer. Well, they are not smiling today, because they have dropped their appeal to the Supreme Court and paid a \$230,000 fine because they are guilty as charged in the in and out election scandal.

However, we are getting the same kinds of answers this time from the current parliamentary secretary to the prime minister, and so there is something seriously wrong with the government's holding itself to account on these election issues.

My question to the member is this. Even though the Prime Minister is saying he is in favour of this motion, how are we going to ensure that it will actually be enforced, because we know the government would do anything to cover up its election fraud?

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Malpeque for his question.

I entirely agree with him. Although I was not here personally in previous parliaments, from what we saw during question period and in general, the government's answers on this subject were absolutely shameful, particularly since we now know that they were guilty that whole time. So yes, I agree entirely.

The member asks what will be done if they vote for our motion and at the end of the day nothing happens. I think that Canadians are watching us closely right now. They are watching what the government does closely, and they are listening closely to every word spoken. If the government supports our motion and does nothing, if it does not shed light on this affair, I think people are going to stand up and protest. The government will have no choice but to shed light on this scandal.

• (1055)

[English]

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to continue today's debate on the motion tabled by the member for Hamilton Centre.

I will start by saying that we are not opposed to this motion. We certainly are supporting Elections Canada's ongoing work by making available all of our records from the last election.

Though we are not opposed to this motion, we must consider that it was brought forward while the parties opposite have been conducting a baseless and unsubstantiated smear campaign against our government and our party over the course of the last several weeks. The point must be reinforced that there is nothing stopping the opposition from supporting Elections Canada's work right now. They can easily provide all of their records relating to phone calls and phone contracts made in the last election right now to assist in the agency's work right now.

The Conservative Party of Canada is doing exactly that and will continue to do so. Our government and party has been unequivocal in its willingness to make all of its records available to Elections Canada officials to assist its ongoing work. We encourage the opposition to do the same. We know they spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of phone calls during the last election. This information can only assist Elections Canada in getting to the bottom of the allegations being levelled. If the opposition really wants to support Elections Canada's work, they should provide all of the records relating to the calls they made in the last election.

As I said, this debate warrants consideration within the greater context in which the motion was brought forward. I would like to take a moment to touch on this briefly.

In the course of the last several weeks, there seem to be three sets of allegations being levelled, particularly toward our government and party regarding calls made in the last election. First, there are specific allegations about riding level activity, mostly in the Guelph area; second, there are complaints by voters in several ridings who received calls that their polling stations had changed; third, there are allegations of misleading calls into their ridings.

On the first point, there have been media reports about the investigation of a specific case in the riding of Guelph. The Conservative Party's national campaign has been clear that it did not organize or know about any such activities in that riding but has been fully assisting Elections Canada. If any untoward behaviour is uncovered, the Conservative Party has made clear its demand that those responsible be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

For the benefit of the House, I will restate that point here. What is alleged to have happened in Guelph, Ontario is unacceptable. Voter participation is the cornerstone of our democracy. In fact, we are proud that more than 900,000 more Canadians voted in the last election. We saw that right across the country and believe it demonstrates the strength of our democracy. However, anyone who makes an effort to suppress voter participation by providing wrong information should be held fully accountable by Elections Canada for doing so.

Business of Supply

On the second point, Elections Canada confirmed that 127 polling locations, representing approximately 1,000 polls and potentially affecting nearly a half a million Canadians, were changed in the 2011 federal election. We have made it quite clear that the Conservative Party of Canada called Conservative supporters to ensure that they knew where to vote. In its attacks, the NDP has claimed that no polling stations had changed. This is in fact false. Even the member for Ahuntsic admitted that polls had changed. She said that in her riding, for instance, it was true that there had been changes to polls and that the Bloc Québécois had called its people to advise them.

• (1100)

On the third allegation, the NDP and Liberals have made a number of new allegations about calls being made in other ridings during the last election. However, when the Leader of the Official Opposition was asked eight times for hard evidence on CBC's *Power and Politics*, she was unable to do so. In the absence of hard facts, it is clear that these allegations are baseless smears brought forward by sore losers unwilling to accept the fact they lost the election.

As far as the motion before the House goes today, we are not opposed to supporting Elections Canada's work in the wake of these exaggerated allegations. In fact, we are doing just that. The Conservative Party of Canada has already provided all of our information to Elections Canada to assist in its ongoing work. We did this willingly.

As the Prime Minister has stated, we have been very clear about the Conservative Party of Canada's activities. In fact, all of the calls made by the Conservative Party of Canada are documented. All of those records are available to Elections Canada, and we will obviously be looking forward with great interest to see what documents exist on the telephone activities of the NDP and the Liberals during the campaign.

If the opposition needs a motion to support Elections Canada's work, so be it, but I want to underline that there is nothing currently preventing the NDP and the Liberals from giving over their own information willingly to Elections Canada officials. If the opposition will not assist Elections Canada's work by providing all of their records relating to the calls they made during the last election, then we can simply conclude that the debate today is not actually to support Elections Canada's work but yet another calculated attempt by the opposition to continue its baseless smear campaign against our government and party. This is quite serious, especially considering the casual way in which the opposition flings these accusations around without regard for fact or evidence.

We know that the opposition spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of phone calls during the last election. If the opposition really want to support Elections Canada's work, they should provide all of their records relating to calls they made during the last election. This information can only assist Elections Canada in getting to the bottom of the allegations being levelled.

We also know that some of the allegations made by the opposition are simply untrue. However, members should not take it from me but from their own operatives. The NDP claims that South Shore—St. Margaret's received fraudulent calls, but the NDP riding president said that was not true. As Wolfgang Ziemer, the NDP riding

association president of that riding during the campaign, has said, "There is just no way that I can add any fuel to this fire, if there is a fire. I have no idea how the riding got on that list".

The Liberals claim that Wellington—Halton Hills received fraudulent calls, but the Liberal candidate also said that was not true. Barry Peters said he did not recall hearing about any suspicious calls, either while out knocking on doors or back at the office.

It is clear that the opposition is levelling allegations against our government and party without regard for basic fact or evidence. This is irresponsible and serves to denigrate not only the millions of legitimate ballots cast by Canadians in the last election but also the very serious allegation of suppression of voter participation in the constituency of Guelph.

Again, what is alleged to have happened in Guelph, Ontario is unacceptable. Let us be categorical: voter suppression is extremely serious, and if anything improper occurred, those responsible should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

If the opposition want to support Elections Canada's work, they should provide all of the records relating to the calls they made during the last election so that Elections Canada can get to the bottom of this. However, so far the opposition seem more concerned about levelling baseless, unsubstantiated and politically motivated smears in a campaign against our government and party than about supporting Elections Canada's work.

• (1105)

To conclude, I have to ask this. What is the opposition waiting for? There is nothing stopping the opposition from supporting the work of Elections Canada right now. It can easily provide all the records relating to phone calls and phone contracts made in the last election to assist the agency's work. In being so keen on supporting the work of Elections Canada in the next election, the opposition seems rather unwilling to provide the support for it right now. In fact, the Conservative Party of Canada is the only party that has been clear in its willingness to voluntarily make available all of its records to Elections Canada officials to assist it in its ongoing work. We encourage the opposition to do the same.

We know the opposition spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of phone calls during the last election. This information can only assist Elections Canada in getting to the bottom of these allegations. If the opposition wants to support the work of Elections Canada, it should provide all of its records relating to the calls it made during the last election.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the minister for showing respect to the opposition motion. It is very in character for the member, who I have come to know.

Business of Supply

Let us first clarify a couple things and get in a quick question. There is some muddy water, notwithstanding the minister's intent to clarify.

Let us remember that the only party under investigation by Elections Canada, to the best of our knowledge, is the Conservative Party. On the documents being asked for, the Conservatives are the ones who have to produce them. If Elections Canada asks us for anything, it will get it.

The media has been asking me, both in the panel last night on CPAC and today at my news conference, to give some explanation as why the government, in camera and in secret, was opposed to this. Now that we have made a big deal of it, the Conservatives have flip-flopped and are now in favour.

I will take this opportunity to ask this question of the minister. Why is the government flip-flopping? We are glad it is, but what is the motivation for that flip-flop today?

Hon. Tim Uppal: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the member for Hamilton Centre. I, too, enjoy working with the member. He is a very respectful member and I appreciate his support as the critic for democratic reform.

We are not opposed to the motion before the House. The important thing is that the opposition spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of phone calls it made during the last election. The Conservative Party of Canada is assisting Elections Canada. I would ask why the opposition is not assisting Elections Canada in the same way. We do not need a motion for that to happen. The opposition can assist Elections Canada right now.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I simply ask the minister to answer the question with respect to the position the government is taking to providing additional powers to Elections Canada. The position on the verification of information provided by political parties is different from the position taken by the party just a few short days ago.

Could the minister please explain the change in position?

Hon. Tim Uppal: Mr. Speaker, the procedure and House affairs committee has done some very good work and has put together a report. The government has received the report and will respond to it. However, we are not opposed to the motion before the House today.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberals are making claims that Liberal callers were making calls to Liberal supporters. To me it seems that there was obviously some errors on behalf of the Liberal campaign, that the Liberals have not owned up to and that they want to point the finger at Conservatives.

Also, the NDP has some concern about union donations and unsubstantiated or illegal donations that were made. I want to know where that stands today.

• (1110)

Hon. Tim Uppal: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his work on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The entire committee is doing some very important work. He raised a very important question about the NDP and the donations or sponsorship it has received. We still do not have the information on

that and we call on the NDP to come clear on it. We are asking the entire opposition to provide information to Elections Canada.

The Conservative Party is assisting Elections Canada in its work. Why do the NDP and Liberals not do the same? We know they spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of phone calls to people right across the country. Why do they not provide the information regarding those calls in the last election to Elections Canada so it can continue its work to get to the bottom of this issue?

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, it is important that when a government comes to the right decision, we should not criticize it for it. The fact that Conservatives were wrong a week ago does not mean that is not welcome that they are right today.

I would like to ask a question relating to all the powers Elections Canada needs to get to the bottom of the current scandal. Does the minister agree that since Elections Canada does not have those powers or resources today, we would be better to have a full independent, well-resourced inquiry, maybe headed up by someone like Sheila Fraser, to get this issue out of the House and somewhere that we can get answers?

Hon. Tim Uppal: Mr. Speaker, I would like to bring the focus back to what we are dealing with today, and that is the motion of the NDP member for Hamilton Centre, which states:

—(a) Elections Canada investigation capabilities be strengthened, to include giving the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request all necessary documents from political parties to ensure compliance with the Elections Act; (b) all telecommunication companies that provide voter contact services during a general election must register with Elections Canada; and (c) all clients of telecommunication companies during a general election have their identity registered and verified.

We are not opposed to the motion.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is important to keep reminding the minister that the Conservative Party is under investigation. It is the Conservative Party that Elections Canada has asked for information. It is the Conservative Party that has failed to provide that information.

The minister seems to think the Conservatives will support the motion and that they have been helpful to Elections Canada. He has said that the other parties should do so as well, but it is the Conservative Party that has been asked to make information available and it has refused to do so.

Why have the minister and the Conservative Party not been prepared to honour the request by Elections Canada?

Hon. Tim Uppal: Mr. Speaker, I remind the member that the Conservative Party of Canada is assisting Elections Canada in the work it is doing in looking into this matter. I also remind the member that the opposition, which spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of phone calls, is not providing the information. Opposition members need to provide their information to Elections Canada on the contracts they signed for those phone calls, where the phone calls came from and who they called. It is the opposition that needs to assist Elections Canada in providing information. The Conservative Party is.

Business of Supply

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we need to remind the government of the in and out scandal. That is something in which it has paid tens of thousands of dollars. Ultimately the Conservatives had to be brought kicking and screaming before they finally were held to task for their responsibility for the in and out scandal from Elections Canada.

Now we have yet another incident with Elections Canada, where the Conservative/Reform Party has been accused of voter suppression, very strong allegations.

Over 30,000 Canadians have contacted Elections Canada. Does the minister not recognize that those Canadians have legitimate concerns? Does he not recognize that those concerns must be addressed and the best way to address that is to ensure that all the records of the Conservatives on file need to be submitted to Elections Canada?

•(1115)

Hon. Tim Uppal: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member may speak very loud in this place, but at the end of the day, the fact is the Conservative Party is providing the information to assist Elections Canada in its work. The Liberal Party spent millions of dollars on thousands of phone calls. Why is it not doing the same? Why is it not assisting Elections Canada in getting to the bottom of this?

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the chance to speak in this debate. I want to indicate that our party will be supporting the motion. We would like to see it strengthened. We would like to ensure that the motion refers not simply to future elections, but to the election of which we just had. Six months is too long. I hope there can be some discussions among the parties to ensure the motion is strengthened.

I would like to give a bit of historical context to this issue. I read the wonderful book by Alan Taylor called *The Civil War of 1812*. We are all reading about the War of 1812 because it is our 200th anniversary. There is a wonderful description in the book of how Simcoe recruited his surveyor general, David W. Smith, to stand for an assembly seat in Essex county in 1792. The book says:

Smith entrusted electioneering to his wealthy “friends”, who campaigned in the traditional style by lavishing music, food, and alcohol—rather than policy discussions—upon the voters. A paternalist rather than an egalitarian, Smith advised his campaign manager, “Let the peasants have a fiddle, some beverage and beef”.

Anticipating victory, he planned a culminating celebration, “I beg an ox be roasted whole on the common and a barrel of rum to be given to the mob to wash down the beef”. The book goes on to say, “As Simcoe expected, Smith won his seat”.

That is how politics was conducted in 1792 by the ancestors of the Tory Party, which is now in place.

I would like to simply bring that up-to-date by drawing attention to a comment that was made to me by a well-known Conservative, who I will not name. He said to me, “Give me a computer and give me an Internet access and I can boom your house and cellphone from three continents away at the same time with the same or different message”. It is the same party but just a different technology. As opposed to ox and booze, nylons and rum, we have a new way of reaching people, which is give us a computer and an Internet access and we can boom one's house and cellphone.

We have to understand how politics has changed and become such a technology-driven system. However, behind every technology, there still are human values as to how we campaign, how we relate to voters and what the limits are.

We need to have clear laws. We need to have clear accountability. We need to ensure that people are held to account for the things they say. We need limits as to how much an individual can spend in each riding and limits as to how much parties can spend, as we all know. That is the Canadian way.

This basic practice in Canada has only been challenged by one party and actually by one person. It was in another life that the current Prime Minister challenged this system. He said that they did not want this system, that we wanted the American system. He said that they wanted a system where people could spend whatever money they wanted. He said that they wanted a system where there was unlimited access to dough. He said that was the kind of system they wanted for Canada. In that case, known as “Harper v. Canada”, and I have to mention the name because it is the title of the lawsuit, the Supreme Court of Canada said that it was actually reasonable and fair for Canadians to limit the ability of third parties to spend as much money as they wanted in the course of an election campaign.

That same Prime Minister, again in another life, described the people at Elections Canada as “jackasses”. The same Prime Minister led his party through the so-called in and out scandal. Day after day in question period, his party refused to recognize the problem, refused to provide the information. His party forced Elections Canada to go to court to get the documents from the party, which finally, after a five year process, copped a plea, accepted the fact that it had done wrong, paid back the money and paid a fine as well.

•(1120)

That has become the culture of the Conservative Party of Canada. In carrying out that culture, it has, at the same time, and it has to be said very clearly, created a very complex but, nevertheless, effective system of communicating with voters across the country.

The minister of state just gave his ritual response. In the course of his speech and in answer to the questions that were asked yesterday by the parliamentary secretary, the robo response king of the House of Commons at the moment, said that our party and other parties paid millions of dollars to make hundreds of thousands of calls. Of course we did. So did the Conservative Party. That is the common technique that is now used by all political parties. Some of the calls are made in person by phone banks, some of them are so-called robocalls and some of them were tele-town halls where people were brought together to listen to a conversation with a political leader or a candidate. That is one of the techniques that we use.

What needs to be clear is that all of these systems can be abused, just as there have been abuses in the past. Is our Canada Elections Act keeping up with the abuses and potential abuses and are we now able to say that we have a system of regulation and real accountability to public authorities that is equal to the technologies that exist?

Business of Supply

There is nothing wrong with a robocall per se. There is nothing wrong with people phoning and saying that they are calling on behalf of the Conservative Party and asking how a person intends to vote in the next election. Voters can either tell them to go away, that they do not want to be annoyed, or they can give them the information. In fact, when I hear this called a robocall issue, it is not really about robocalls. It is about misinformation in calls. It is not even about a call that is unpleasant, a call that says the voter's Liberal candidate or New Democratic Party candidate has done this, and this and this. There are all kinds of negative things said during campaigns.

Every member of the House has been in an all candidates debate. When somebody on the other side says something we object to and do not think is true. We have all seen leaflets that say negative things about our parties, our candidates or our leaders. There is a difference between hardball, tough politics, even negative politics and dishonest politics. We need to understand where the line is to be drawn. There are tough things that are said and things said that we might think are unfair. I happen to think that many of the things that were said about our former leaders were very unfair. They help to suppress votes, discourage voters and create a climate that creates negativity, but I would not say that they were illegal.

[*Translation*]

I do not always agree with what is said and sometimes I think it is unfair. The negative ads against our leaders were hard. I am sure my colleagues in the Conservative Party and the NDP will agree that these ads could be considered unfair. But there is a difference between tough politics and dishonest politics, between negative politics and politics based on fraud. That is the question now facing Elections Canada.

I am sure the minister's speech will be repeated by all the Conservative members who speak here today. It will be repeated again and again. The Conservative Party is under investigation. That party is the one under a very clear court order to produce the documents in question. The Conservatives have no choice but to comply. We have indicated that we are prepared to co-operate with Elections Canada and hand over any information we have, without any questions. That is what the Liberal Party of Canada will do.

We need to know exactly what the problems are. Some calls were made that cannot be explained, but they must be explained. The Conservative system is very centralized when it comes to its philosophy and organization. We need an explanation for the calls that were made last year at Passover to Jewish families by callers claiming to be from the Liberal Party. Those were not robocalls. They were made by real people who claimed to be calling on behalf of the Liberal Party. We know, however, that the campaign office of my colleague from Mount Royal was closed. His office did not make those calls. So we need an explanation. If the same thing happened in several other ridings, it is hard to believe it was a coincidence.

• (1125)

[*English*]

If it happens in one riding, we can say that it is clearly a rogue situation. However, it happened in a riding that requires a password to access the central system. How does the company involved get access to the central system? How does one get access through the company? Those are perfectly legitimate questions.

One of the first examples I heard about did not involve the Liberal Party at all, but rather involved the Bloc Québécois in the riding of Rivière-du-Loup in the by-election of 2009. We heard of an example where a call was made indicating that it was a call from the Bloc. It was not a call from the Bloc. It was a call coming from somewhere else.

How do we explain these phantom calls? How do we explain the number of phantom calls? There is a difference between a call that is dishonest, a call that is intended to suppress a vote and a call that is exactly intended to misdirect someone to a polling station at place Y when in fact it should be place Z. How do we explain the number of times that has happened?

If I were given a computer and Internet access, I could boom a person's house and cellphone from three continents away at the same time with the same message or a different message.

How do we track down this information? What if some of those calls were coming from offshore? What if they are offshore and off book in terms of how they are financed? These are legitimate questions. When something happens once we can say that it is an accident, when it happens twice we look into it but when it happens dozens of times in dozens of ridings there must be some other explanation, and there must be some way of getting to the bottom of what that is.

If the government is sincere in saying that it wants to get to the bottom of it, it is the Conservative Party of Canada that can get to the bottom of it the easiest: the campaign team, the people working in the war room that was specifically intended to deal with close ridings.

No one involved in the business of politics today can have anything but a grudging sense of admiration for the discipline and organization that goes into the Conservative campaigns. They have a central message that it is repeated over and over again. They have raised a lot of money and that money is put into creating the greatest and latest technology that is available.

The problem is that we need to get to the bottom of this. We need to know the values of the people who are behind that technology and behind that impressive organization. That is the issue that Elections Canada can get at from a certain perspective but it is an issue that only the members of the Conservative Party can deal with themselves.

Have the Conservatives created a culture in which winning is everything? Have they created a culture in which they say that we are sore losers? Looking over at the other side, I would say that they are just a bunch of sore winners. They do not let up. They are relentless in their determination to go forward in the way they have, such as in 2006 with the in and out and the brazenness with which they defied any questioning with respect to this subject and with respect to the fact that they resisted Elections Canada and finally had to succumb to a subpoena and a police raid in terms of seizing documents.

Business of Supply

•(1130)

[Translation]

That is the question. What are the real values behind the machine? Yes, as professional politicians, we must admit that the machine is very professional. It is monitored very closely from the centre, but the fact that it is so closely monitored from the centre means that very few accidents happen in the ridings. That is why we want answers to our questions and, quite frankly, why we will not give up.

[English]

We are not going to let go of this. It is not a pleasant subject. We are constantly having to ask questions about things that we cannot quite believe could be happening. They are not based on, in the words of my colleague opposite, unsubstantiated smears. They are based on complaints from Canadian citizens.

The member opposite shouted out just now that it is too late. I have news for the member. It is never too late for justice and truth to come out. It is never too late for people to bring forward complaints. Someone receives a call early in the campaign and is asked who they are going to vote for and either declines to answer or says it is none of the caller's business because the call is coming from the Conservative Party. Then two days before the election that person receives another call saying the polling station is in Kalamazoo. It is very important to recognize the kind of conclusion we expect people to draw from that. When they hear and read about other people getting these calls, they say they got that call too. That is why we have an absolutely unprecedented number of complaints coming into Elections Canada.

The Conservative Party is going to have to come to grips with the fact that it is not a matter of what the Liberal Party thinks or does, or what the NDP thinks or does, or what the Bloc or Green Party thinks or does, it is about the Canadian people and what they think. It is about the forms that they are signing, the things that they are saying. The argument of the Conservative Party is not with the Liberal Party and it is not with the NDP, it is with the Canadian people. Conservatives have to understand that. They reposition themselves for the umpteenth time and their talking points shift the blame from one party to another party to somewhere else. They have to look into their own hearts and minds and ask themselves a simple question: have we done something here that we should not have done?

I make no bones about it. This is an unprecedented situation, to quote Mr. Kingsley. We are literally in uncharted waters. Those so-called experts or others who say there is nothing to all of this stuff do not really understand the implications of what happens when bad values and good technology get mixed up in the same lethal cocktail. This is what happens. This is why Elections Canada needs these additional powers.

I am glad the Conservatives have backed away from their previous position. They have done a 180 on this issue. It is time that they did. However, we need to make sure that it applies not to future elections, but to this election. We need to make sure that it applies to what is happened in these campaigns. I look forward to those discussions.

We have gone from the serving of beef and beer, from nylons and rum, to where we are today. It is something we have to come to grips

with as Canadians. Corruption is corruption is corruption. It should not happen wherever it happens. We have to deal with it today.

•(1135)

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the leader of the Liberal Party for his speech today. During his speech he talked about the fact that members of a specific religion received phone calls at a time that was not respectful. The callers said they were representing the Liberal Party. Very respectfully, very sincerely, I ask the leader of the Liberal Party this question. The Liberals themselves, and he admits it, spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of phone calls across the country. Is it not possible that the source of those phone calls, who claimed to be Liberals, were actually Liberals?

Would it not just make sense for the Liberal Party to provide all the information regarding those calls to Elections Canada? The Conservative Party is assisting Elections Canada. We provided information. Why does the Liberal Party not do the same?

Hon. Bob Rae: Mr. Speaker, first of all, we are. Second, the reason the Conservative Party is co-operating so profusely with Elections Canada is because it has a subpoena that requires it to do so. It has to produce documents. This is not a situation where Conservatives can run across the street and say to Elections Canada they will do it quite gladly. They have a court order telling them they have to produce documents under the Criminal Code of Canada. That is the reason they are doing it.

With respect to the issue that I raised, I know the minister was listening carefully. I raised the example of the member for Mount Royal because first, these calls were not robocalls, they were calls made in person. Second, they were calls that were made when the member's office was not open. The calls were not being made on his behalf. That is an extremely clear and categorical answer that I can give to the hon. member.

I can also say that, of course, everyone here is co-operating with Elections Canada. There is a bit of difference between co-operating with Elections Canada and being required to do so because of a court subpoena.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it feels somewhat strange and familiar to be onside with the hon. member on a file. Let me reaffirm that we will be strengthening this motion. I committed to that publicly last night, I did this morning at the news conference and I will again. We will be strengthening this so it applies to past as well as to present elections. This new law would apply to any file in front of the Chief Electoral Officer. He could use it at his discretion.

To get back to a macro view of all this, the hon. member is very well travelled in the world and has a very sophisticated, civilized world view. He and I were recently in Morocco together as international election observers, helping that country with its election. I would ask the hon. member what he thinks all this and the other actions of the government are doing to the great reputation that Canadians are proud of, in terms of the damage to that very proud reputation that we have.

Business of Supply

Hon. Bob Rae: Mr. Speaker, I think it is doing its share of damage. We all watch how politics are practised in a number of countries. It is interesting to me how a number of the consultants who work for the Conservative Party, as well as consultants who work for other parties, are all doing international work. They are doing work in Israel, the U.K. and Australia. It is troubling because we see these things happening. Techniques and philosophies are being applied, such as voter suppression, which is in itself wrong and, even worse than that, voter misinformation. So this is a very serious question for Canada's reputation.

We have a great deal of confidence in Elections Canada, unlike the government, which refused to vote for a motion indicating our support and confidence in Elections Canada. So it is a very serious question the member poses.

• (1140)

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is something else that we all should be concerned about. We are often called to travel abroad to encourage fledgling democracy and the multi-party system in certain countries, and even to participate in elections as observers.

Could the hon. member for Toronto Centre speak to the effect the current situation in Canada might have on our international reputation?

Hon. Bob Rae: Mr. Speaker, that is an important question. I fully agree with the hon. member who just asked that question.

I began my speech by talking about the Canadian system we have created. In my riding, we can spend roughly up to \$80,000. When I talk about this situation with my American colleagues, they cannot believe that the Canadian system is like that, but it is. There is a ceiling on contributions from individuals and we do not get money from corporations or unions, just from individuals.

That is the system the Prime Minister of Canada does not accept. He wants to create a system in which money can buy anything, where nothing else matters but money.

I am convinced that the system we have created in Canada is good and that we must do everything in our power to maintain it.

[English]

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened quite intently to the member for Toronto Centre, particularly when he said that now is the time to get back and to follow this through, and that Canadians will not forget. I have a comment in terms of the Liberal Party of Canada about the ad scam. There were brown envelopes and money missing. There is still \$40 million missing. I know the Liberals would love to help get that funding back.

I know there are some left-leaning websites out there that some opposition MPs are tied to, that are encouraging all of these 31,000 contacts. I also understand that the Liberal Party has a machine that does its centralized calling as well. So I would ask the hon. member if in fact the Liberals are doing this. Are they going to provide those records to Elections Canada as well?

Hon. Bob Rae: Mr. Speaker, if the Liberal Party has a machine, it has avoided my detection over the last number of years. What the

Liberal Party has, as I assume the New Democratic Party has, as I am not familiar with what systems it uses now, is a number of contractors who also make calls. As my party has indicated publicly and to the hon. member, the Liberal Party is going to be sharing all of that information with Elections Canada, just as I understand you are doing as well.

The difference between you and us is that you are doing it because you are under subpoena, we are doing it voluntarily.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Just to remind all hon. members, it is not the Chair who is sharing the information. He ought to direct his comments in this direction.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to address a question to the hon. leader of the Liberal Party. He made reference to the fact that we have seen in previous election campaigns instances of election crime, essentially. Calls misdirected voters and reported to be from the Bloc when they were not.

The most comprehensive example of a previous election fraud effort was in Saanich—Gulf Islands in 2008. Robocalls were made to NDP supporters to get out in support of a candidate who was actually no longer in the race. This allegedly and arguably changed the result of the election and denied the Liberals a seat. The NDP members were so upset in Saanich—Gulf Islands by this crime that even though it was a Liberal Party candidate who was the biggest victim, the NDP filed a complaint with Elections Canada. The Liberals filed a complaint. Elections Canada simply did not get to the bottom of it.

I would like to ask the hon. member for Toronto Centre if it is too late to go back to what is essentially a cold case to figure out who stole the election in 2008 in Saanich—Gulf Islands?

• (1145)

Hon. Bob Rae: Mr. Speaker, the simple, hard fact is a lot of calls are hard to trace. It is no accident that they are hard to trace. Offshore calls are particularly hard to trace. It would not be difficult to place offshore calls into Saanich—Gulf Islands.

This is something that we all have to come to grips with. To repeat the quote that I made before, “In this world today, all you need is a computer and access to the Internet, and you can have access to all kinds of things. It is very difficult to trace them”. I think that is something we have to take a hold of. We need to make sure that all of the calls made are not only reported to Elections Canada, but that a record of those calls is kept for an extended period of time.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I apologize for interrupting my hon. colleague's intervention. This will be brief.

I just want to point out for the record that the Leader of the Liberal Party, on a number of occasions in his intervention, mentioned that the Conservative Party of Canada has subpoenas or is under court order to produce documents. That is absolutely false. That is an incorrect statement. Could he have the opportunity to retract his statements?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

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The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I am not sure that is a point of order. It is a point of debate. Order, order. The hon. member for Québec.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to share my time today with the hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity today to support the motion moved by my esteemed colleague from Hamilton Centre. This motion, which would give the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request documents he deems necessary to investigations, is very important to me.

Canadians' right to vote is a symbol of democracy and something we can all be proud of. This right gives qualified voters the right to express their personal opinions freely and confidentially. This precious right is essential to the proper functioning of our democratic society.

Today, March 8, is International Women's Day, and I think it is important to note that this right was granted to Canadian women in 1918. The acquisition of this right was one of many pivotal moments in the history of Canadian democracy. Unfortunately, events of the past few days are anything but reassuring. The latest information from across the country suggests that some of our fellow citizens were tricked and thus deprived of their right to vote. These allegations are alarming.

I would like to briefly review the events that point to a need to strengthen Elections Canada's investigative powers.

Last week, we learned that during the 2011 election, robocalls falsely informed voters that their polling station had changed. Other individuals received harassing phone calls from people claiming to work for the party those individuals supported. These tactics persuaded voters not to cast their ballots. Should these allegations prove true, they would constitute very serious election fraud, and that is why they must be treated with the respect our Canadian democracy deserves.

Since this information surfaced, Elections Canada has been so overwhelmed with calls from individuals claiming to be victims of fraudulent calls that it has made an online form available to simplify the complaints process. At least 31,000 complaints have been received so far.

I would note that Elections Canada is a non-partisan, independent organization that ensures that Canadians can exercise their democratic right to vote. Elections Canada plays a key role in preserving a fair and honest democracy.

The problem is that there are currently no controls over the use of robocalling. Parties are not subject to privacy legislation or rules governing telephone solicitation. Parties are only required to comply with the provisions of the Criminal Code and the Canada Elections Act.

For that reason, the Chief Electoral Officer recently complained that he could not carry out proper investigations without full transparency by all parties.

In fact, the Chief Electoral Officer submitted a series of recommendations to the Speaker of the House of Commons on legislative reform after the 40th general election. He asked for the power to request that political parties provide "any documents and information that may be deemed necessary to verify compliance with the requirements of the Act with respect to the election expenses return".

At present only local campaigns must file documentary evidence to support their election expenses returns. In his request, the Chief Electoral Officer indicated that his provincial counterparts have this authority, and he also pointed out that political parties receive public funds based on their election expenses returns.

The NDP wants to give the Chief Electoral Officer the authority to ask for documentation if he considers it necessary. This would ensure that the Chief Electoral Officer has the information he needs to fulfill his obligations under the Canada Elections Act. According to a report released last week, in committee, Conservatives opposed the Chief Electoral Officer's request that he have the authority to demand invoices and documents from political parties.

Now, the government is saying that it was not aware that Elections Canada claimed that it did not have the powers or the resources to investigate as it should. I now hope that the government will stop putting its head in the sand and will finally provide the Chief Electoral Officer with the power he requested so that he can conduct a full investigation.

Another aspect of the motion moved today would ensure that all telecommunication companies that contact voters during a general election are registered with Elections Canada.

• (1150)

Elections Canada is now spending a lot of time and a lot of taxpayers' money to find the telecommunication companies involved in the scandal and trace them back to their clients. Right now, there is a lack of responsibility from these telemarketing companies, which is particularly problematic when we consider the trend toward the outsourcing of calls and the use of automated telecommunications.

This results in a system where an increasing number of the tools that can be used during election campaigns require less and less accountability and are harder and harder to trace.

Under our motion, the identity of telecommunication company clients will have to be registered and verified so that it would be impossible for the imaginary Pierre Poutine of the non-existent Separatist Street in Joliette to order automated calls.

If those involved had not known that their actions would be difficult to trace, they would have never authorized the calls that disrupted voting on the very day of the election. The registration of telecommunication companies and their clients would prevent this type of scandal from happening again in the future. The NDP is continuing to do everything it can to resolve the current scandal. The Conservatives, on the other hand, will continue to divert attention and blame others without addressing the issue head-on.

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In fact, since the rigged calls were first revealed, the government has only admitted that there were some irregularities in the riding of Guelph, in Ontario. As for the rest, including the repeated automated calls to destabilize their opponents, the government has been saying that the allegations are exaggerated. If such is truly the case, the Conservative Party should not have any reason to prevent the implementation of a registry for telecommunication companies that contact voters.

And, if this is not enough to convince the government, a survey conducted by Angus Reid shows that 81% of Canadians and even 72% of Conservative voters are calling for an independent inquiry to get to the bottom of things. In addition, 55% of the 1,667 respondents chosen at random as part of a telephone survey conducted by Forum Research said that elections should be held in the ridings where it has been proven that fraudulent calls were made.

In that same survey, one out of ten people said that they had received an automated telephone call about a polling station change during the last election. If we project these results to the 12.5 million households in Canada, that means that approximately 250,000 households would have received fraudulent calls.

As if that were not enough, this morning *La Presse* reported that an employee of Responsive Marketing Group, which raised funds for the Conservative Party, was fired after he harassed party members and contacted them under false pretences. This information came to light several days after party supporters in Quebec began to complain about being harassed by fundraisers.

Political analyst Guy Lachapelle, who teaches at Concordia, said that the Conservative fundraiser's aggressive approach mirrors tactics perfected by the Republican Party in the United States. He added that there should be a law to protect people from this practice because it is misrepresentation and puts undue pressure on defenceless individuals.

In addition, *Le Devoir* recently reported that voters were relentlessly solicited by the Conservative Party, which made false claims that they had pledged to donate money. It goes without saying that this is an issue that hits close to home for Canadians. People want answers, and that is why we want all parties to agree. Increasing accountability by requiring telecommunication companies and their clients to register is the most effective way to ensure that Canadian elections continue to be free and democratic.

In closing, I hope that the government will not stop at voting in favour of the motion, but will also act on it so that we can investigate potentially serious actions without delay and safeguard and preserve Canadians' confidence in our democracy.

• (1155)

[English]

Hon. Gary Goodyear (Minister of State (Science and Technology) (Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario), CPC): Mr. Speaker, Elections Canada has limits on contributions or what someone can donate to a party. The way the Liberals have gotten around that is by borrowing, in some cases, hundreds of thousands of dollars and then not repaying those loans. Elections Canada is having some difficulty determining whether those are contributions, which are then clearly illegal, or loans that

simply were not repaid. The NDP has also taken cash from unions, which is also illegal.

I am not opposed to this motion, but I am concerned that it does not allow Elections Canada to investigate the illegal contributions by unions to the NDP and the non-repayment of loans contribution scandal by the Liberals. Maybe I could get some clarification on that.

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Papillon: Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out to members that there is something that I was unable to quantify today: the price of our Canadian democracy. Mr. Speaker, allow me to tell you and all my hon. colleagues that Canadian democracy is priceless. It is about time we strengthened the Canada Elections Act and gave Elections Canada the tools to investigate what seems to be the worst case of election fraud this country has ever seen.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I find it interesting that the Minister of State (Democratic Reform), per the government line, is trying to avoid talking about the issue at hand. The issue at hand relates to Elections Canada and the 30,000-plus Canadians who have phoned it to say they were manipulated in some way. We do not know the content of all of those calls; all we know is that there are very strong allegations from coast to coast about how the Conservatives may have manipulated the last federal election.

I am wondering if the member would agree that the best service the Conservative Party could give to Canadians today would be to stay focused on the issue. We are talking about voter suppression, the wrong information given to Canadians, which ultimately led to many Canadians not participating in the last election. Would she not agree that, in essence, that is the focus of the debate we should be having today and on Elections Canada's ability to rightly investigate the matter?

• (1200)

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Papillon: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his comments. That really is what we must focus on. As legislators, how can we enhance the Canada Elections Act and provide Elections Canada with more tools? That is the crux of the matter. Democracy is at stake, and it is priceless. It is our duty to Canadians to ensure that this does not happen again.

[English]

Hon. Gary Goodyear (Minister of State (Science and Technology) (Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a quick comment. I just found out that these are actually not calls but form letters directed through an NDP website to Elections Canada.

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I wonder if the member could confirm two things. Are these all legitimate calls or are they form letters instigated by the NDP, and will this motion allow Elections Canada to investigate the illegal cash contributions by unions to the NDP and the loan fraud by the Liberals?

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Papillon: Mr. Speaker, I would be pleased to enlighten my colleague, who may have missed part of my speech. I spoke about Elections Canada receiving 31,000 complaints from across Canada asking it to investigate the problem. Elections Canada decided to make a form available online to simplify the process. It was swamped with calls from Canadians who were concerned that there may have been election fraud in Canada. That makes no sense.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I did not recognize the hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking in the last round. I will try to do so for the next round.

I now recognize the hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway.

[English]

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is always an honour to stand in this place and give a speech, but never is that honour more profound than when we are rising to speak to democracy because the essence of this place is the democratic nature of our country. There are many aspects that go into a healthy functioning democracy. We need an open and diverse media, free political expression, an informed electorate and free and fair elections.

In order to have free and fair elections, those elections must be conducted with integrity that is beyond reproach. In order to have a functioning democracy, Canadians or any people must have trust that those elections reflect exactly their will.

I come from Vancouver Kingsway which has one of the most well-known examples of a breach of trust where voters put their trust into electing David Emerson, a Liberal, only to see that person cross the floor within 14 days and sit as a Conservative member in complete violation of the voters' choice in that election. Therefore, I can say that the people of Vancouver Kingsway have a keen interest in and commitment to democracy in this country. In fact, all Canadians are proud of our democracy because democracy is a peaceful way to elect their representatives and to choose their government. It is the way that all people of the world can have a peaceful, organized fashion in which they can freely select who will pass the laws that will govern their lives.

I happen to be the official opposition critic for immigration. All members of the House know people or have family members who came to this country seeking that very freedom, yearning for that very democracy where their votes, their electoral process is not tainted by the kinds of practices they saw in many countries of this world where there is graft, corruption, ballot box stuffing and tricks of every kind meant to thwart the expression of people's democratic choices.

To have a strong election system requires a system of campaigning, voting and behaving politically that is beyond reproach. We need an ironclad guarantee of legality and there are a number of reasons for this because democracy requires the consent of the

people. A government must first reflect the people's true decision and, second, elected representatives make the laws. We are trusted by the people of this country to come here and write the very laws that will govern the people of this country. We lose the moral authority to do that if politicians or political parties break the law. I do not mean 80% or 90% compliance with probity in electoral conduct. I mean 100%. That is the guarantee that Canadians want in their electoral system.

Today, we rise to speak to serious allegations of electoral fraud in the last federal election. There are a number of aspects to this. We are hearing thousands of reports that phone calls were made to people at late hours, likely to agitate them and likely from opposing campaigns. There were thousands of phone calls to citizens on voting day misdirecting them to the wrong voting place. In some cases, perhaps, those callers were posing as representatives from Elections Canada, after Elections Canada told the political parties in writing that they were releasing the changed polls to them and asked them not to communicate that information to the voters.

Thousands of voters were added to the voting list on election day in clear violation of election laws. As we stand here today, over 30,000 complaints were made to Elections Canada. Many of the ridings in the last election were won by dozens of votes, sometimes hundreds of votes, sometimes a few thousand votes. This is not a one-off situation. This is a serious case of fraud that, if true, means that the outcome of the election may have been different. It is also a violation of the Canada Elections Act and, if some of these allegations are true, they are criminal acts punishable by jail time and fines. Every allegation is directed at only one party in this House and that is the Conservative Party of Canada.

● (1205)

The evidence is mounting. We have RackNine, which is a company that did work for many Conservative campaigns, including the Prime Minister's campaign. There is a record of holding hospitality suites and advertising for the Conservative Party with many Conservative connections. We also know now that fraudulent calls were made in the riding of Guelph through RackNine. RackNine denies that it knew what the content of the calls were but there is no doubt that the calls came through RackNine.

There is a company called RMG, which is a firm that contacts voters, manages databases and raises funds for the Conservative Party and other right wing groups. Former Conservative campaign manager, Tom Flanagan, even attributed the party's 2006 election win to that company. Its administrators have given many thousands of dollars in contributions to various Conservative campaigns. The company also owns an American affiliate, Target Outreach, that sometimes works for the republican party.

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Dozens of local campaigns, 94 of them according to some sources, gave important contracts to RMG. Many of them paid a similar amount of money, around \$15,000. The campaigns of many ministers, including the Minister of Finance, Associate Minister of National Defence, President of the Treasury Board, Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, have used RMG services.

Three former employees of an RMG call centre in Thunder Bay have explained publicly that they had given false indications about voting stations to many voters in ridings that had tight races during the 2011 election. An employee has testified that she had advised her supervisor that the script she was following was, “sending people to the wrong place”.

We have a history and a context. The Conservatives recently pled guilty to violating Canada's elections laws through the so-called in and out scandal after standing in this House day after day denying that they had done anything wrong. At the end of the day, they pled guilty and paid the fine.

The Conservatives have admitted to publicly making misleading phone calls suggesting that a Liberal member of this House was about to resign. They have admitted to doing that falsely, as the member was not about to resign. They also have close ties with republican companies and operatives who openly advocate voter suppression techniques.

We can often tell a lot by how someone acts when facing an accusation. How have the Conservatives acted? Well, they have changed their stories repeatedly. First they said that there was no evidence to support these allegations. Then they said that other parties committed these acts, which is absurd. Why would the Liberal Party make misleading phone calls to their voters and misdirect them to the wrong place? That is absurd. They said that Elections Canada made the calls. They said that polls were changed and that Elections Canada informed voters that the polls were changed. They used the Edmonton East riding as an example. Then we found out that there were no changed polls in Edmonton East. The Conservatives then said that it was just a smear campaign and that they did not do it but now they say that everybody does it. This is not the behaviour of an innocent group.

The Conservatives opposed the motion by the New Democrats to give the Chief Electoral Officer the power to subpoena documents from national parties. The Conservatives said that they would give all documents to Elections Canada but when faced with the motion that would explicitly give the Chief Electoral Officer the power to subpoena those very documents, they opposed it.

Why are the Conservatives opposing a public inquiry if they have nothing to hide? Given the vital importance of the integrity of elections to our Canadian democracy, why would the Prime Minister not call a public inquiry immediately and clear the air? If the Conservatives are innocent and have nothing to hide, they would have a full public inquiry to show Canadians that fact.

I have stood in this House for years now and heard the Conservatives use that same argument against people in trouble with the law. Well, if there is nothing to hide, why do they not just give up their rights? The Conservatives have used this with the

recent lawful access law saying that if Canadians have nothing to hide why do they have a problem giving their information to telcos.

If the Conservative Party has nothing to hide, if it truly has done nothing wrong, then it should call a public inquiry now and give the powers to the Chief Electoral Officer so that he can get to the bottom of this. Canadian democracy demands no less.

We all have an obligation in this House as members to protect democracy. Long after we are gone, this institution survives and it is our responsibilities as MPs today to stand up for Canadian democracy. The NDP will do it. Why will the Conservative Party not do it?

● (1210)

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have about three and a half years more to serve here in Ottawa, if the Prime Minister respects the fixed date election law. Voters need to know that the people they elected are really here in Ottawa. They need to have confidence that they are being represented by the people for whom they voted.

In view of that, is it not important for Elections Canada to have the powers it wants and needs to investigate all the irregularities and possible fraud that occurred in the election that brought the occupants of this chamber here to Ottawa?

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Speaker, I can only reiterate the remarks made at the beginning of my speech when I said that a democracy requires the consent of the governed and it demands 100% confidence in the electoral system. When there is any question that people who presume to exert power over a population may not have had the legitimate right to do so, it calls into question something much deeper than the right of a particular member to sit. It calls into question the essence of our democracy itself.

The motion before us calls for giving the Chief Electoral Officer a few basic powers: the capability to request all necessary documents from political parties to ensure compliance with the Canada Elections Act; to require all telecommunications companies that provide voter contact services during a general election to register with Elections Canada; and that all clients of those companies during a general election have their identity registered and verified. Those are very straightforward and simple powers.

I would ask any member of this House to stand and justify why he or she could possibly vote against those bare minimum requirements to ensure our democracy does represent the rights of people to sit in this House, as the member so eloquently suggested.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am glad we are debating this motion today because it is one that speaks to the democracy that we have been pushing forward to encourage voters to come out. However, how do we encourage voters to come out when we hear this type of news?

Nathalie Gara-Boivin from Providence Bay says:

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I am gravely concerned by the Elections Canada report that has just traced illegal phone calls made during the 2011 federal election to a company that worked for the Conservative party across the country.

She goes on to say that she is demanding a full “independent public inquiry, backed by Elections Canada and the RCMP”, and is also requesting “possible byelections in the affected ridings”.

She goes on to say:

We cannot allow individuals to be scapegoated for actions that benefit institutions. We need to lay the foundation for new laws to restore the integrity of Canadian elections.

On that note, how can we be encouraging people to come out to vote when we see such actions taking place on the government side?

• (1215)

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Speaker, the member raises an excellent point. There are profound consequences among Canadians when they see this kind of behaviour. One of them, that all members of this House have witnessed over the previous decade or two, has been a declining interest in our own democracy. In the last election, only about 60% of Canadians cast a ballot. These are democratic rights that our grandfathers and great-grandfathers fought and died for in trenches and that our grandmothers had to demonstrate in the street for. It is International Women's Day today and the suffragette movement in this country was our grandmothers saying that they deserved the right to vote and demanded the right to vote.

All members of this House should and must be interested in ensuring that our elections are beyond reproach. If there is any suggestion that any party has engaged in any behaviour that tried to trick a Canadian into not voting or tried to use illegitimate or illegal techniques to try to win an election, that amounts to electoral fraud, to stealing an election. We need to say, as a House, that we have zero tolerance for that. Yes, we need to be tough on crime, we need to have zero tolerance, so let us have zero tolerance for electoral fraud.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to wish all the women in the House of Commons and across Canada a happy International Women's Day. I commend the enormous contribution all women make to this great country.

I am pleased to take part in today's debate on the opposition motion moved by the hon. member for Hamilton Centre.

[*English*]

We are not opposed to the motion. We certainly are supporting the work of Elections Canada by making available all of our records from the last election for its investigation of the situation in Guelph.

Although we are not opposed to the motion, we must consider that the motion has been brought forward while the parties opposite have been conducting a baseless and unsubstantiated smear campaign against our government and our party over the course of the last several weeks.

There is nothing stopping the opposition from supporting Elections Canada's work right now. It could easily provide all of its records relating to phone calls and phone contracts made in the last election to assist in the agency's work. The Conservative Party of

Canada is doing exactly that and will continue to do so. We encourage the opposition to do the same.

The opposition spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of phone calls during the last election. This information can only assist Elections Canada in its work. If the opposition really wants to support the work of Elections Canada, it should provide all of its records relating to phone calls it made during the last election.

[*Translation*]

I repeat: we not opposed to this proposal. At the same time, however, I wish to make it clear that we are giving all of our information to Elections Canada. Nothing is stopping the NDP from providing its information to Elections Canada as well.

The motion, which is very vague, asks that:

- (a) Elections Canada investigation capabilities be strengthened, to include giving the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request all necessary documents from political parties to ensure compliance with the Elections Act;
- (b) all telecommunication companies that provide voter contact services during a general election must register with Elections Canada; and
- (c) all clients of telecommunication companies during a general election have their identity registered and verified.

The existing Elections Act already gives the Chief Electoral Officer and the Commissioner of Canada Elections a number of powers in that regard. I would like to provide a few examples to the hon. members present in the House.

Let us first take a look at the Chief Electoral Officer. Canada has a very strict federal political financing regime that is intended to ensure the integrity, fairness and transparency of the electoral process.

To achieve that objective, the Canada Elections Act includes rules respecting the contributions and expenses that can be made by five types of political entities, namely: political parties, riding associations, candidates, nomination contestants and leadership candidates. The act also sets a limit on spending by a third party during an election.

All these political entities must submit detailed financial reports to the Chief Electoral Officer, within the prescribed timeframe. The political parties are carefully monitored and they must submit three types of financial reports.

First, each year every party must submit a financial transactions return that includes its revenues and expenses, and also a list of its donors. That requirement is found in section 424 of the Elections Act.

Second, a political party that is eligible to the quarterly allowance must also provide, for each quarter, a report on contributions received during that quarter. That is under section 424.1.

Finally, following a general election, every party must submit to the Chief Electoral Officer a report on all its election expenses. That is provided under section 429.

The Canada Elections Act already provides that the annual financial report and the report on a party's election expenses must undergo an external audit. To this end, the auditor for a party must have access to all the party's documents, as required under sections 426 and 430.

In order to increase the scope and effectiveness of this external audit, the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs proposes to give to this auditor, who already has access to all the relevant documentation, new responsibilities regarding compliance. The government is currently looking into this recommendation.

When the Chief Electoral Office receives a party's annual financial report or its report on election expenses, he already has the authority to ask the registered party to correct its report, in the timeframe that he sets. That authority is found in section 432(2). For example, he may do so if the report seems incomplete or erroneous.

The Chief Electoral Officer also has another power. He can withhold part of the electoral expense reimbursement of a party that does not comply with its reporting obligations. Indeed, the Chief Electoral Officer does not issue the certificate authorizing the receiver general to pay to a party its electoral expense reimbursement until he is satisfied that the party and its chief agent have fulfilled their obligations.

I am now going to talk about the powers of the Commissioner of Canada Elections. There are more examples. While the Canada Elections Act provides stiff sanctions for a party that does not fulfill its financial reporting obligations, it also includes the necessary investigative authority to ensure compliance.

• (1220)

Thus, the Canada Elections Act provides for the appointment of an independent investigator: the Commissioner of Canada Elections. The commissioner is not appointed by the government, but rather by the Chief Electoral Officer. The Commissioner of Canada Elections has a well defined mission, to ensure that the Canada Elections Act is enforced and implemented. He has very broad powers at his disposal in carrying out this role.

If he believes that the public interest warrants it, the Commissioner may take all necessary steps, including spending for the purposes of investigations he conducts under the Canada Elections Act. A provision of the act also stipulates that investigators working for the Commissioner are public servants in accordance with section 487 of the Criminal Code. This provision enables the Commissioner and his investigators to request a search warrant from a judge when deemed necessary.

When he has reasonable grounds to believe that the Canada Elections Act has been violated, the Commissioner refers the matter to the director of public prosecutions who decides whether to prosecute with a view to punishment. If he makes this decision, the Director of Public Prosecutions Act guarantees that the director of public prosecutions is wholly independent from the attorney general or, more generally, from the government.

The Canada Elections Act also confers other powers upon the Commissioner of Canada Elections, including requesting an injunction during an election or entering into compliance agreements. A compliance agreement is a mechanism the purpose of

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which is to enforce the Canada Election Act. It is more flexible than prosecution, and it enables the Commissioner to enter into an agreement with the person who has broken the law. Under this agreement, the person acknowledges having broken the law and undertakes to follow it in the future. These agreements are conditional. Failure to honour such an agreement may lead to prosecution.

• (1225)

[*English*]

Elections Canada already has considerable powers with existing laws. Therefore, although we are not opposed to the motion, we are not certain that it really adds anything to the overall powers of Elections Canada and the director of Elections Canada to undertake its work.

In the motion, the opposition is proposing:

—that in all future election campaigns: (a) Elections Canada investigation capabilities be strengthened to include giving the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request all necessary documents from political parties to ensure compliance with the Elections Act; (b) all telecommunication companies that provide voter contact services during a general election must register with Elections Canada; and (c) all clients of telecommunication companies during a general election have their identity registered and verified.

[*Translation*]

We have no objection to such a proposal, but at the same time, it must be stressed that we provide Elections Canada with all our information. Nothing prevents the NDP from also providing Elections Canada with its information.

[*English*]

The NDP has sponsored this motion, yet that party has failed to provide its telephone activity during the campaign to Elections Canada.

[*Translation*]

There have been media reports about an investigation into a specific case in the riding of Guelph. Voter suppression is extremely serious and if something inappropriate occurred, the perpetrators should be punished. The national campaign team of the Conservative Party did not organize any such activities in this riding, and has no knowledge of the matter, but is cooperating fully with Elections Canada.

The opposition spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of telephone calls in the last election campaign. If the opposition wants to help Elections Canada, it should hand over all its files on calls made during the last federal election.

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In closing, as we can see, the Canada Elections Act contains many provisions to ensure the integrity, equity and transparency of the political financing system: contribution and spending limits for political parties; the requirement to produce a number of financial reports, and the requirement to have them audited by an external auditor; as an administrative measure, the possibility for the Chief Electoral Officer to ask that a report he deems incomplete or inaccurate be corrected and the possibility of withholding a portion of the election expense reimbursements from the parties if they fail to comply with these requirements; extensive investigative powers for the Commissioner of Canada Elections, an independent investigator appointed by the Chief Electoral Officer; and the power for the Director of Public Prosecutions to decide whether to initiate a prosecution under the Canada Elections Act, independently of the Attorney General or the government.

I repeat, we have no objection to such a proposal. The Conservative Party of Canada ran a clean and ethical campaign. It should be noted that we are giving all our information to Elections Canada. There is nothing stopping the NDP from giving its information to Elections Canada. If the opposition wants to help Elections Canada, then it should provide all the records relating to the calls made during the last election campaign.

The opposition spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of phone calls during the election campaign, and it too should provide this information to Elections Canada.

• (1230)

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting to listen to the member and his colleagues on the government side. In response to the demand made by Canadians that the government actually co-operate with Elections Canada, they say that the New Democrats and Liberals have not provided any information. The reality of the situation is that it is the Conservative Party of Canada that has been requested by Elections Canada to provide information, and it is the Conservative Party of Canada that has not released that information.

If or when the New Democratic Party is requested to provide that information, it will provide any and all information. I would like to ask the member why the Conservatives continue to present this information that clearly is not true.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Mr. Speaker, we are of course co-operating fully with the investigation in Guelph. The member should also know that Elections Canada is doing its work. It is doing what it needs to do to get to the bottom of the inappropriate activity that took place in Guelph and we are co-operating fully. The opposition is asking us to provide information over and above what Elections Canada is asking for. We are co-operating and collaborating with it fully and we hope to get to the bottom of what happened in Guelph.

Having run a campaign in the city of Toronto, I know that when it comes to spending resources on what the opposition is alleging might have happened, that would have been a really silly use of resources. What we do is to identify our supporters and give them a call and encourage them to vote, and that is exactly what we did in the last election.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, member after member of the Conservative government are trying to confuse the issue. This particular member has made reference to the fact that the Liberals and New Democrats have spent millions of dollars on robocalls. That is nothing new in the sense that a great deal of money is spent on robocalls, teleconferencing, voice blasts and so forth. They even occurred in Winnipeg North, the area I represent.

The issue before us is that serious allegations have been levelled about there being some sort of campaign or orchestrated approach to suppress voters from voting, to mislead them, to tell them to vote at a different poll from where they should actually vote. I am wondering if the member can address that specific issue and the 30,000 people who have seen fit to actually contact Elections Canada and express their concerns, just as we have expressed here.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Mr. Speaker, the opposition, the Liberal Party in particular, are alleging some nefarious use of a mysterious database. As any member would know, databases are constructed by human beings and so they sometimes contain errors.

I want to build on what the interim leader of the Liberal Party mentioned earlier, that he did not know his party had a database like this. I actually find it shocking that the interim leader was unaware that the Liberal Party has its own database to track voters. It is called Liberalist, but he does not know his party is actually using it. It is making its own phone calls and supplying its own information to its own call centres and has spent millions of dollars itself. I will present to the House that it is very possible that its own call centres made mistakes in informing its own voters.

Hon. Gary Goodyear (Minister of State (Science and Technology) (Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario), CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, it is not just that the Liberals are denying having their own machinery or a Liberal list, but also that there is no fact behind what the leader of the Liberal Party said about a subpoena. That too is more misinformation in the smear campaign by the opposition.

I would ask the hon. member if he would agree that this kind of constant misleading and smearing by the opposition is in fact its own embarrassment, and that it is disingenuous and shameful on the part of the opposition. Would he comment on this being of great concern to Canadians who validly voted in the last election and that in itself it is a shameful smear by the opposition.

• (1235)

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Mr. Speaker, the minister is absolutely correct. There have been allegations coming from the Liberal Party, as well as the NDP, that there is some kind of subpoena or court order out there. In fact, it is false. They are making that up: there are no subpoenas, there are no court orders. Elections Canada is doing its work and we are co-operating fully and providing it with information.

I just want to get back to the history. As the Minister of State for Science and Technology, he understands that building computer systems to assist with an election campaign is a fairly new development. However, the task of identifying voters is really as old as the hills. I will just read a little quote here to that effect:

—organize the whole State, so that every Whig can be brought to the polls.... [D]ivide their county into small districts, and...appoint in each a subcommittee...to make a perfect list of all the voters...and to ascertain with certainty for whom they will vote.... [A]nd on election days see that every Whig is brought to the polls.

Who said that? It was Abraham Lincoln in the *Illinois State Register*, February 21, 1840. So there is nothing new here.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I just want to ask the member a question, because the Conservatives keep trying to turn the table and say that this was instead what the Liberal Party and the NDP were doing. In trying to turn the table, it is not working. The Conservative Party is trying to hide and it is not working.

Let me just refresh the member's memory as to what the recommendations were from the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, following the 40th general election in 2010:

Despite the considerable funding given to registered parties, the Chief Electoral Officer does not receive any documentary evidence of the expenses reported in the election expenses return. Nor does the Act provide the Chief Electoral Officer with the authority to request that a party provide such evidence. Therefore, he has no means to verify the accuracy of the reported expenses on which the reimbursement is based.

That was in comparison to provincial laws, the Chief Electoral Officer noted as well.

Although the member is basically saying that he does not know if the motion is going to do anything, will it not in fact do something provided that the Conservative Party forwards the information required? Are the Conservatives still going to hide under the blinders?

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Mr. Speaker, when it comes to election spending the purpose of the Canada Elections Act is really to make sure that no one can buy an election.

We do a good job, I would say, on this side of the House in raising funds. We are very transparent in the sense that every campaign puts together its financial return, which is audited at the local level and again by Elections Canada. There are some thorough controls in place to make sure there is no untruthful or inaccurate information.

I know there are perhaps several members of the official opposition who did not run campaigns and yet ended up in the House of Commons and, I guess, good for them. However, for those of us who did work hard and identified our voters and encouraged them to vote, this is what we do: We call them, we ask them if they will support us, and then we remind them at the advance polls and on election day to please vote.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, can the member give us his complete assurance that under no circumstances whatsoever did the Conservative Party or any of its operatives actually authorize the phoning of citizens to identify them so that if they were identified as not Conservative, they would be called at a later date and told to vote at another location?

Mr. Bernard Trottier: Mr. Speaker, I can tell the hon. member for Winnipeg North what happened in Etobicoke—Lakeshore. That is something I had some responsibility for and a hand in winning.

What we did was to organize volunteers, very thoughtful people who spent a lot of their time, dedicating time away from their families, to volunteer on the campaign. We also engaged call centres

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with good reputations and who do good work. We always tell our voters that we are calling on behalf of the Conservative Party of Canada and ask them to please support the Conservative candidate. In this case, that was me.

In a world of finite resources, volunteer time and money in this case, we would not waste time calling voters who told us not to talk to them.

● (1240)

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise and put my oar in the water on a matter that goes to the heart of why I and many other people are here. That is the democratic right of Canadians to participate in elections and debate without fear of intimidation or fear of receiving misinformation or otherwise being subject to the kinds of fraudulent actions that are being considered in this most recent case involving the Conservative party in a number of ridings across the country.

I want to commend my colleagues, including the member for Hamilton Centre for moving this important motion and the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent for seconding it. It is a critically important motion because of what we have seen happening with our democracy in the country over the past number of years.

I listened to an earlier speaker talk about the days of nylons and rum. He went back to roasting pigs and barrels of rum. It is not a very pretty sight when we talk about that. The province I come from has its own history of how elections were conducted, but we have come some considerable distance, I would say, or at least that is what we want to tell the world. We have come a considerable distance in our country at living up to the democratic ideals and principles that we love to discuss with other countries around the world. We often see the Prime Minister and members on the other side when they are in other lands almost shaking their fingers at other countries, suggesting that they should be as democratic as we are, that they should adhere to the kinds of principles and moral standards with which politics is conducted in our country. Then we come up against the kind of situation we are facing now.

Why is the motion before the House at this time? Within the last few months the Chief Electoral Officer appeared before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and made a series of recommendations. He asked for, among other things, the power to require political parties to supply every document or piece of information deemed necessary to verify compliance with the requirements of the act with respect to the election.

Those recommendations came to a vote in the committee. The New Democratic Party voted in favour of those recommendations. The Liberal party, the third party, also voted in favour of those recommendations. Lo and behold, the government, which has a majority on the committee, refused to allow the committee to strengthen the Chief Electoral Officer's power of investigation and ability to proceed in this manner.

That is why we are here today, because we want to get to the bottom of this and give Elections Canada the authority to quickly get to the bottom of any similar cases of electoral fraud in the future and, hence, prevent their recurrence.

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I would like to take a few moments to talk a bit about what we can do now, or maybe what we need to do about things that have happened just recently.

• (1245)

I will tell the House why this is so important to me. I first ran for office back in 1991. I was successful, thanks to the good people of Halifax Atlantic. I have been in this business for 13 years.

The key factors which motivated me throughout my time of getting into and continuing in politics, as well as now getting in at the federal level, were the desire to do everything I could to make our political system and our democracy more effective, as well as ensure that voters and citizens felt that it was worth their while to participate. By that, I do not only mean they should only vote, but they should feel somewhat compelled to participate in debates and raise concerns with members of government or their elected officials. On many occasions, when speaking in high schools to young people, when speaking to Canadians of all ages and certainly when speaking to those in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour where I have had the most opportunity, I have even suggested that I feel it is somewhat part of our responsibility as citizens to actively participate in the political process.

Right now upward of 40% of the population are eligible to vote but do not. Between 75% and 80% of young people between the ages of 18 and 33 do not participate in the political process. They do not vote, nor do they become engaged. That is crazy and it is wrong. Why are they not participating?

I have asked the young people in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour what we can do to give them a better sense that it makes a difference for them to participate. They have talked about the fact that their politicians need to engage with them, that they need to solicit their opinions, that they need to take their comments seriously and help them see some of their wishes and dreams reflected in government policy and debate. They want to know that they matter. As well, when a political party or politician runs for election and makes certain commitments, they want to see those commitments fulfilled in an honourable and respectful manner if they are elected. They do not want them to just respond to the people who actually cast ballots for them, but represent the principles of our democracy and all of the people for whom they have been elected to represent. When people come to my office in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, I do not check to see if they can prove they voted for me before my staff and I will try to help them or intervene on their behalf.

It is somewhat troubling the way the government perceives that it should not act on the basis of the 39.6% of the population that voted for the Conservatives. In our parliamentary democracy, the majority wins. In this case, they have the majority of the seats in the House. That does not mean they represent the majority of Canadians. It means they were elected by not quite 40% of the population. There is 60% of the population that did not sign onto whatever their campaign booklet called for that time.

• (1250)

Canadians who voted for me also have important things to say. They also have good ideas. There are things that think need to be done for our country and our communities. They expect the government to pay attention. Just because a citizen did not vote

Conservative does not mean that individual is less of a Canadian. This is part of the issue the opposition has had with the government. The Conservatives always stand and say that a majority of Canadians voted for them, so therefore they can do whatever they want. That is wrong. Less than a majority of Canadians voted for the Conservative government. That kind of stuff turns voters off.

That is why I and my colleagues on the official opposition benches received over four and a half million votes in the last election. That is why we are so determined to do everything we can to try to restore some sense of accountability, decorum and responsibility to the political process.

We have heard from the government on the recent issue of people getting misleading calls, about being misdirected, about getting illegal calls. The calls were illegal because the callers indicated they represented Elections Canada when in fact they did not. The government says that it is doing everything it can to assist Elections Canada. It has been trying to turn the problem around to the opposition, saying that we should be as helpful.

Canadians understand this. Why do we not believe the Conservatives when they say that they have done everything right, that they are assisting in every way, shape and form? We only have to go back a couple of days to when the government finally admitted it was wrong with respect to the in and out scam. It pleaded guilty and paid upward of a quarter of a million dollars in fines as a result.

What is the in and out issue? The in and out issue started after the 2006 election. It took Elections Canada about five years to finally get to the point where the Conservative government admitted that it did something wrong and paid the fines accordingly.

The investigation took far too long. It took five years and cost taxpayers almost \$2 million because the Conservative Party of Canada did what it is doing right now. Members stood in their places and said day after day that they did not do anything, that somebody took on a vendetta, that somebody was trying to smear them, somebody was providing inaccurate information. They pleaded their innocence. They took Elections Canada to court and spent millions of dollars defending themselves to no avail. They finally recognized they were done like dinner and admitted their guilt and paid the fine.

Hon. Gary Goodyear: That's clearly false.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: The member opposite says it is completely false. Why did they pay some \$263,000? I guess it was a donation. It was in and out. I do not know what it was.

The point is the government does not have any credibility when it comes to giving Canadians the straight goods. That is the bottom line.

• (1255)

I woke up this morning and one of the first things I did, as I usually do, was scan the newspapers and I read an article in the *Toronto Star* written by a columnist I have a lot of respect for—

Hon. Gary Goodyear: Of course you do.

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Mr. Robert Chisholm: A columnist who is very well respected even though the members opposite are trying to degrade her reputation. However, her columns appear across the country in different newspapers and different publications because they are sound, well considered and contain an incredible amount of wisdom.

What she said in the article today was true, but there was a level of cynicism that it represented. The article said that the tactics of the Conservative government, whether it be the in and out, or proroguing government, or being held in contempt of Parliament, or now this case of voter suppression, it represented an attitude or mentality that was working, she suggested, that the base of Conservatives' support was holding and that it would be ever thus.

When I read it initially, I was discouraged about what it meant, but then I did not accept it for one second. I do not believe Canadians are that cynical. I do not believe Canadians will stand by and watch the Conservative Party hijack the democracy in our country. Canadians deserve better.

The member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour and his colleagues in the opposition are going to work tirelessly every step of the way and we are going to defend the interests of Canadians and their right to the kind of democracy that is going to ensure their rights are respected and these kind of tactics will be no more. That is what we are going to do.

My time is running out, and I know members opposite would like me to have more time. Perhaps we can find another opportunity to have this discussion. However, in all seriousness, it is extremely important that we get this done and get it right. The very foundation of our democracy is at stake. We need to stand up for democratic principles and we need to start right now.

While I support the motion and think it has incredible merit and should be supported by all members of the House, we need to ensure it is amended to some degree to capture the current controversy in which we are involved. Therefore, I move:

That the motion be amended by deleting the words: "in all future election campaigns".

• (1300)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): It is my duty to inform hon. members that an amendment to an opposition motion may only be moved with the consent of the sponsor of the motion. I therefore ask the hon. member for Hamilton Centre if he consents to the amendment being moved.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very proud to give consent to this excellent amendment. It only strengthens my motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The amendment is in order.

Hon. Gary Goodyear (Minister of State (Science and Technology) (Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was not opposed necessarily to the original motion, but I am a little concerned with this amendment. One would think those members could have gotten together on their motion as they have done with their smear tactics.

Would the amendment, or the original motion as a stand-alone, allow Elections Canada to investigate the illegal contributions which the NDP took from unions?

Also, we have learned that people can only contribute a certain amount to a candidate. The Liberals have come up with an interesting way of getting illegal contributions in the sense of loans. People lend them, in some cases, hundreds of thousands of dollars which the Liberals do not repay. Elections Canada cannot determine if that is a scam, a loan or a contribution.

Would the member confirm for me if this amendment would allow for Elections Canada to investigate those two things as well?

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, the interesting thing is that Elections Canada did not need this additional power in order to deal with the spurious allegations that were made by the government with respect to those issues. It brought the matter to the attention of the New Democratic Party. The New Democratic Party provided any information that was available readily. We worked with Elections Canada. We corrected whatever administrative errors there might have been. We acknowledged the fact that there were mistakes. We corrected those mistakes.

Why does the parliamentary secretary not act the same way? Why will his government not stand up and take responsibility for once?

Hon. Gary Goodyear: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order. I think it is imperative that we tell the truth in this House. Obviously, the Conservative Party has done just that and again the member infers it was—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order. That is not a point of order. It is a matter of debate. I am sure there will be many other opportunities to raise such questions and comments.

The hon. member for Bourassa.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are not the ones under investigation. We do not have a leader who has treated the people at Elections Canada like a bunch of idiots as the Conservatives have done. I therefore think this is an excellent initiative, to enhance these powers and make sure we can cast the net wide.

I would ask my colleague to tell us what the Conservatives have to hide. How could it happen? We are talking about the riding of Guelph, but there were a huge number of ridings affected. We know there were some very tight elections. We have seen the results. That is perhaps probably because people were making calls. We want to know what the member thinks about that situation.

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, that question has been asked by government members repeatedly for the last couple of weeks.

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What are they trying to hide? I just gave an example. The parliamentary secretary thought he would stand on his feet and somehow slag me and the NDP about something we did wrong. I told him in no uncertain terms how we handled it. We handled it straight up. We paid attention to what it was that was being suggested. We contacted Elections Canada. We worked with Elections Canada. We solved the problem to the satisfaction of Elections Canada. That is not something the Conservative government has ever been able to say, that it is prepared to be held accountable.

• (1305)

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague made an excellent speech and moved an even better amendment. My question for the hon. member is with regard to the amendment.

I am ready to stand to be corrected if the government has new information. My initial response from the government is that it is not likely to support the amendment. I think that was clear from the minister's comments. One of the reasons I am hearing is that the government will suggest that like criminal law, we cannot retroactively apply it. In other words if someone did something that was legal last week, this place cannot pass a law that says that is illegal now, and therefore the person broke the law.

I am not a lawyer and I do not think my hon. colleague is either, but my understanding is that on administrative matters, there is no prevention of retroactivity. Powers and authority can be given to entities and they can then apply that authority to any file they wish.

I would ask the hon. member if that is his understanding of the difference between retroactivity in criminal law versus retroactivity in administrative law.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, I have heard that excuse from the government, but that is all it is, an excuse.

I am not a lawyer. I have been called a lot of things, but not a lawyer, and I say that with respect to all my friends in the legal profession. However, I have spent a lot of time dealing with legislation. The member is absolutely correct that there is nothing to prevent this chamber from passing legislation that does reach back and have retroactive impact.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are conflating a lot of different issues on the whole issue of what happened during the last election. Clearly, it seems that some serious issues took place in Guelph. I think that we as members of this House need to let Elections Canada and other authorities conduct and conclude their investigations so that we can hold those accountable to account.

There is a lot of other stuff that has been alleged. The debate is getting conflated. It actually brings disrepute on all of us in the House when we start conflating that debate.

Clearly there seems to be some problems that happened in Guelph in the last election. I do think those people who perpetrated those activities, if true, should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. However, we should wait for those investigations to conclude before we jump to any conclusions.

With respect to any other issues outside of Guelph, we really need to be cautious with the kind of allegations we throw about in the House.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, I could not agree more, frankly, with what the member has said.

The point is that we are trying to get to the bottom of tactics that are rattling the very foundation of our democracy. In 2006 we had some problems with what the Conservative Party was doing in terms of financing, in terms of proper accounting for election practices. It took five years and millions of dollars to finally get the offending party to acknowledge that it was wrong and to ensure that there were changes.

All we are suggesting with the motion and the amendment is that we give Elections Canada sufficient authority to conduct its investigation in a quick, expeditious and efficient manner to get to the bottom of the allegations so that they are not hanging like a cloud over all of us.

We need to get to the bottom of it in an expeditious way. We need to clarify the rules so that we make the system of parliamentary democracy in this country as transparent and effective as we possibly can. That is the goal.

• (1310)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to share some comments from one of my constituents, Cam Willett from Little Current. He has a Ph.D. and is an assistant professor at the school of education at Laurentian University. He said:

I hope that there is a parliamentary process by which we, as a country can express our non-confidence in this government. We need to have a proper investigation of these tactics by an impartial third party that is beyond the reach of the Conservative government and that whose findings will be respected.

Please stand up in parliament and express my outrage...In my opinion, their actions indicate some degree of culpability. If they cannot be transparent, then they are hiding something.

Perhaps my colleague could discuss why the motion was moved and what the benefits are of this motion compared to external audits from parties.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, the whole point is to have an independent officer of Parliament responsible for this and not leave it to the individual parties. We need to have an independent officer to arbitrate and investigate to make sure that these matters are handled at arm's length.

I would say to the member's constituent that the New Democratic Party will continue on with Jack Layton's legacy to ensure that change is made to improve the democracy in this country so that all Canadians can be proud once again of the political process.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to add my voice to a very important debate. As is my custom, I am never really sure what I am going to say until I start saying it. I will provide my comments in that vein.

Business of Supply

I want to start by correcting the record. It is very important that if we are having a debate on this subject, we make sure that in this place, even though there may be hyper-partisanship, all comments be factual. I can appreciate the fact that this is a place for healthy and sometimes acrimonious debate. However, the very basis of our democracy and our parliamentary system is that facts put forward in this place are in fact true.

I heard earlier today in the speech by the leader of the third party that the Conservative Party of Canada was being forced under court order, by subpoena, to forward documents to Elections Canada. That is absolutely untrue. I do not know whether the interim leader of the third party was making those comments deliberately or if he was mistaken. The fact remains those comments made by the leader of the Liberal Party were completely and substantially untrue.

I bring that forward not only to set the record straight but to point out one of the big problems we have in this ongoing debate. I refer again to some of the comments made by the leader of the third party. He said the culture of negativity in itself is promoting voter suppression. I could not agree more. His comments and comments from colleagues opposite are adding to that culture of negativity. I suggest that there is absolutely nothing in the comments made today and on previous days that offer any proof to the allegations that are being made daily. That is what causes negativity.

I heard my colleague, who just finished his intervention, say that he and his party want to get to the bottom of this and have Elections Canada determine exactly what went on. I could not agree more. The government, in light of all of the unproven allegations, wants to get to the bottom of this more than any other party in this place. We know that the Conservative Party of Canada did absolutely nothing in terms of voter suppression during the last election campaign. Yet all we hear on a daily basis, both inside and outside the House, are unsubstantiated allegations that somehow the Conservative Party was behind this massive voter-suppression scheme across Canada.

No one knows yet because no one can prove that there was any kind of a voter-suppression scheme across Canada. We believe that there were some very serious problems in Guelph. We have not found any definitive proof yet. Based on some of the comments we have heard and some of the information we have received, it does appear that something might have happened in Guelph. We encouraged Elections Canada from day one to try to find out what happened. If there were contraventions to the Canada Elections Act, if in fact there was an orchestrated voter suppression campaign, we want Elections Canada to find out who was behind it. If there was some sort of organized campaign of voter suppression, that individual or those individuals should be dealt with to the full extent of the law.

• (1315)

I do not think we could be clearer in our desire to see a resolution and an answer to what might have happened in Guelph. Beyond that, no one knows. All we have before us are allegations. On a daily basis in question period, we hear allegations from the opposite side of the House suggesting that somehow the Conservative Party was behind these allegations of corruption, of voter suppression, without any evidence.

Those are serious charges, unproven charges. On one hand I hear the opposition saying, “We want to be proud of our democratic system. We want to make sure that Elections Canada operates in a fashion that makes all political parties compliant with elections law”. On the other hand, the opposition is making these unfounded, unproven allegations without allowing Elections Canada to do its work.

The Conservative Party has willingly provided, and will continue to provide, information to Elections Canada to assist it in this process. However, until there is actually anything found to be beyond Guelph that was illegal or in contravention of the Elections Act, that could constitute voter suppression, how can anyone in this place stand up and say, with any firm belief or any firm knowledge, that one party or another was guilty of some offence? No one can.

That is what all members are hearing. It may have started here, but it has mushroomed. Unfortunately now Conservatives are hearing from many Canadians who are adding their voice to this controversy, without actually knowing what it is that they are adding to.

Let me give a couple of examples. We have all heard over the last week or two, and we have all read, the news reports of individuals in Canada who say that they received a phone call that might have been from a live individual or from an automated dialer. They want to report it to Elections Canada. Perhaps in some cases it was a legitimate complaint. Perhaps someone was contacted by either a live caller or an automated caller actually trying to suppress that person's vote. However, I have heard so many examples that are the farthest thing from voter suppression, and yet the opposition seems to be categorizing them as corrupt actions by the Conservative Party.

Let me give an example. Less than a week ago, I read a news report where a Canadian citizen made a complaint to Elections Canada and said, “I received a call just prior to the election. It was a live caller and that individual tried to get me to change my vote”. I thought to myself, “My God, what is next? People actually coming to your door to try to persuade you to vote for them?”

That is the hysteria that is being developed across Canada on this subject. I would suggest the opposition is fanning the flames of that hysteria. Every single day it is trotting out examples, allegations, not examples but allegations, trying to purport the Conservative Party is somehow behind it. Yet when asked, the interim leader of the official opposition had to admit that she had absolutely no hard evidence to support the allegations the opposition has been making on a daily and weekly basis.

That is what is causing the negativity. That is what is causing Canadians by the thousands, and I would suggest hundreds of thousands, to start questioning the very democratic system that we have in this country. We want Elections Canada to find out exactly what happened. It has to be able to determine the veracity of all of these contacts or complaints. It is not up to the opposition to presuppose. It is up to Elections Canada.

Yet, what do we see? We see third party groups, out of country groups, supported by members of the NDP, encouraging people to link onto their websites so the links automatically get sent over to Elections Canada.

Business of Supply

● (1320)

We hear NDP members saying they think Elections Canada should do its work, and decrying the fact that anyone might have used a robocaller from outside Canada. Yet, in fact, they are complicit in assisting American and international left-wing groups in trying to persuade Elections Canada that there are complaints.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I see I touched a nerve with my friends on the opposite side. That is understandable. No one wants to be called a left-winger. I understand that, it is true. In all seriousness, we as parliamentarians need to ensure that Elections Canada is allowed to do its work, to report back to this place and to determine the veracity of any complaint made to its organization.

I will admit, and I think any member in the House who has been involved in politics for any length of time will readily admit, that from time to time mistakes happen. Sometimes those can lead to misinformation. That is part of the problem that Elections Canada has. Has there been a deliberate attempt to suppress votes in an organized fashion across Canada? Or has there been a random selection of individuals who have contacted Elections Canada about issues that really were not organized voter suppression?

Let me give another example. I will not name the individual or the party. This happened at a provincial level, in a campaign in 2002. I smile when I tell the story because it is somewhat humorous, but it speaks to the fact that sometimes during campaigns mistakes can happen. A particular candidate of a particular party was planning the “get out the vote” campaign for election day. Part of that was having automated phone calls to the candidate’s own supporters encouraging them on voting day to get out and vote. It is a valuable technique that every candidate and every party uses to try to make sure that identified supporters actually get to the polling stations and cast their ballots.

The election day chair and his band of volunteers programmed all their identified supporters into the automated call centre. The call centre was to start phoning at 12 noon on election day and go until 7 p.m. at night, to try to capture all of the supporters and encourage them to get to the polls. They programmed it and went home for the evening. What happened? At exactly 12 midnight the phones starting ringing in all the supporters’ households. They had made a mistake and put 12 p.m. rather than 12 a.m. What happened? By 3:30 in the morning, that campaign was inundated. The campaign chair was phoned at home, the election day chairman was phoned at home. They rushed in and found that they had made a mistake. They were harassing their own voters and their own supporters.

I will give another example of an honest mistake. In 2004, the year I was elected, I won by a staggering majority of 122 votes in the riding of Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre. However, the outcome was challenged by my Liberal opponent. When Elections Canada sent out the voting cards, with information telling voters where their polling stations were, it did so based on postal codes. Frequently in rural constituencies and rural ridings, a person who may reside in one riding actually picks up the mail in another riding. Therefore, that individual has a postal code in a neighbouring constituency. That is what happened in my case. Hundreds and hundreds of people

from my riding were sent voting cards from Elections Canada telling them to vote in a different location. Therefore, my defeated Liberal opponent rightfully went to the courts and got a court challenge to try and see whether there was a case to be made for a byelection, to overturn the election results.

● (1325)

As it turns out, not one person who was given incorrect information cast their ballots at the wrong station because in rural Saskatchewan, as I am sure it is in rural Canada, everyone is fairly familiar with where the closest polling station is and they normally go there regardless of what someone has told them to do.

However, my point is that Elections Canada made an honest mistake. Should that be considered voter suppression? I would suggest that if the opposition had its way, it would try to characterize that as an organized attempt if it had not been for Elections Canada doing it. It would be an organized event by the Conservative Party to suppress the vote. Sometimes mistakes happen.

I am not suggesting for a moment that the thousands of contacts made to Elections Canada were frivolous, untrue, or, if true, were as a result of a mistake. However, I am saying that there are many things that could have happened in the last campaign that could explain some of the problems that we apparently are seeing outside of Guelph.

I merely ask all members to wait and allow Elections Canada to do the investigative work it is allowed to do, compelled to do and qualified to do. I know we will not see that co-operation from members opposite because this is a partisan environment. However, at the end of the day, I am absolutely convinced that we will find the results that state that there were no organized events by our party, and I honestly hope that those results will show that there was no organized attempt by any other federal party to engage in voter suppression.

Before I conclude, I want to deal with one more aspect of the motion before us today from my hon. friend from Hamilton Centre and that is another misconception being promoted by the opposition. It is saying that in the most recent report tabled in this House from the Chief Electoral Officer, the government overturned, overruled or rejected an option provided by Elections Canada and the Chief Electoral Officer with respect to compliance audits.

The facts are that in his report to the procedure and House affairs committee, the Chief Electoral Officer made two recommendations. Overall he wanted to see compliance and proven compliance by all federal parties with election rules and law. We completely agree. To that end, he forwarded two options. Option one was that Elections Canada itself could engage in compliance audits. It would get all of the financial information from all federally registered political parties and do a compliance audit to see whether all of the rules were adhered to. Option two was that the parties themselves would be required to conduct an independent compliance audit to verify that they had followed all election rules.

Business of Supply

We agreed to option two because we believe that it is incumbent upon the federal parties that are seeking election to cover the cost of those independent compliance audits. Quite frankly, it is the cost of doing business. I hear arguments from members opposite saying that is being unfair to the smaller parties. That is simply the cost of doing business. Why should the taxpayers of Canada bear the expense of compliance audits when the parties should be covering those costs?

Finally, while I do have great respect for my friend from Hamilton Centre, I must say that the motion before us today is extremely poorly worded in as much that it says:

...Elections Canada investigation capabilities be strengthened, to include giving the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request all necessary documents from political parties....

The Chief Electoral Officer has the ability now to request documents from political parties. How can we expand his capabilities for a power he already has?

● (1330)

The motion is too broad and too vague but we will not oppose it because we, more than any other party in this place, want to see Elections Canada do its work and report back to the House with the results of its investigation.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will indicate for my colleague again, as I did for the previous Conservative speaker, because they insist on putting things forward that are absolutely untrue, that the Chief Electoral Officer's report states:

Indeed, unlike candidates and other regulated entities, political parties are not required to provide any documentary evidence to support their returns.

Therefore, the Chief Electoral Officer does not have the power, which is why he came to committee to ask for the power in the first place.

If the motion is passed by the House, the government would then be required to bring legislation to the House within six months. Given that the government has now indicated that it plans to support the motion, not the amendment, is it also its clear intent to provide legislation for the committee as per the motion if it passes the House today?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I want to ensure we are dealing with factual statements in the House. I must correct my hon. friend. He is quite right when he read from the Chief Electoral Officer's report and from the Canada Elections Act itself that political parties currently are not required to forward information. However, the motion, as I said, is very poorly written. It reads, "to include giving the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request all...documents". He has always had the power to request documents.

It is one thing to argue that political parties should be compelled to provide information. We agree on the compliance side of things, which is why we agreed to have an independent compliance auditor look at all of the financial returns of every political party and assure the Chief Electoral Officer that all rules were followed in the correct fashion. However, the Chief Electoral Officer has the power and has always had the power to request documents. How can we expand upon a power that the Chief Electoral Officer already has?

Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on more than one occasion in his speech, I think the member said that neither he nor his party have been subpoenaed. As he knows, we rely on information given to us either by third parties, the media, unidentified sources or identified sources.

According to his knowledge, can the member tell me that not one Conservative member of Parliament, candidate, organizer or fundraiser across this country has been subpoenaed?

● (1335)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, in his comments earlier today, the leader of the third party said that the Conservative Party of Canada had been subpoenaed and had been ordered to produce documents. That is absolutely untrue. I did say that I was unsure whether the leader of the third party had been mistaken in his allegation or had done so deliberately. I would hope that he did not do so deliberately. I would hope that he was not trying to mislead the House in a deliberate fashion.

I stand by my comments. The Conservative Party of Canada has not received any subpoena or any court order directing it to turn over documents to Elections Canada. We have done so willingly and we will continue to assist Elections Canada in its work.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, members have been talking about the fact that we need to give Elections Canada time to investigate and come out with the results. The whole intent of the motion is to ensure Elections Canada gets the information it deserves because the government has continuously refused to provide those documents. At committee, government members indicated that they did not want to provide the information. Now we see the tables being turned. Will the government provide all of the information required by Elections Canada to get to the bottom of this?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, that is exactly what I was talking about, the opposition's habit of making unfounded, baseless allegations that are completely untrue.

The member is not on the committee. I am a member of the committee. At no time during the committee did any member of the government say that we were unwilling to hand over documents requested by Elections Canada. We never ever said that.

What I believe she may be referring to is the situation of the request of the Chief Electoral Officer on the compliance audit side. There were two options given. We readily agreed with one of the options, which was that an independent compliance audit would be performed by each political party and paid for by each political party. Just because the opposition disagrees with that and would like to see the encumbrance on the taxpayer rather than the parties does not mean that we are withholding documents. That is a false statement and I hope the member corrects the record.

Hon. Gary Goodyear (Minister of State (Science and Technology) (Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario), CPC): Mr. Speaker, it would probably be easier just to turn around and ask my hon. friend but I do not want to interrupt his thinking so I will ask it out loud.

Business of Supply

The leader of the Liberal Party stated this morning that the Liberals do not have any machinery. In fact, they do. It is called the Liberal list. I find it shocking that the leader of the Liberal Party would not know about his own databases but I will give him the benefit of the doubt.

If the Liberals do not even know about their own machinery, how can they be so sure that these calls that everybody is talking about did not come from the Liberals' own machinery?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, quite frankly, I believe what the hon. leader of the third party was doing when he said that was making a self-deprecating remark that there was no real political machine in the Liberal Party that he had recently seen since it had been reduced to 35 seats in this place.

Could there have been a mistake made within their own automated phone calls and live phone banks? The leader of the Liberal Party admitted that his party did, as does every party in this place, engage in some form of "get out to vote" campaign, of voter identification campaign, utilizing either live phone banks or automated phoning apparatus.

What he has not admitted is whether there is any possibility that Liberal phoners harassed their own supporters or gave them wrong information. He cannot prove that and yet he is casting these wild, unfounded smears against the Conservative Party, which are uncalled for and are untrue.

• (1340)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minister's comments are interesting. On the one hand, there is only one political party that has actually been charged and has now had to pay. Does the member remember the in and out campaign and how long his party had to fight that and how it tried to marginalize that as an issue?

Elections Canada had to take you to the Supreme Court of Canada where you—

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Shame on you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Not you, Mr. Speaker.

—where the Conservative Party ultimately had to pay, I think, two hundred and some thousand dollars as an admission of guilt.

Why should Canadians believe that the Conservatives are treating this issue seriously when their past record clearly demonstrates that they want to drag things out and confuse the matter?

The point is that there was some form of a conspiracy. Will you not acknowledge that fact? Thirty thousand Canadians is not a small number of Canadians to call Elections Canada.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. I would just remind the hon. members to direct their questions and comments through the Chair.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I am quite glad my hon. colleague raised the issue of past records and past practices because I would like to ask my friend about the \$40 million that is still missing from the Liberal sponsorship scandal. The money is somewhere. If I take the same approach as my friends in the opposition about allegations, we can only assume that the \$40 million ended up in the

bank accounts of some Liberal candidates somewhere in Quebec. That is what the opposition would say. I am not about to make any such allegations but I am suggesting that if the member opposite wants to talk about past records and past practices, he should look in the mirror.

[Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, before anything else, I would like to say that I will be sharing my time today with one of my colleagues.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to rise in the House to speak to the motion brought forward by my colleague from Hamilton Centre and seconded by my colleague from Louis-Saint-Laurent. I would like to congratulate them on the work they have done on this very important issue, which is quite crucial for our democracy.

The motion before the House is extremely important, because it sets out various ways of strengthening the integrity of our democracy. The motion seems to me to be necessary, given the way the scandal of the fraudulent calls in the last election campaign has mushroomed. Today, according to all the information that is being collected every day from my colleagues in the NDP, from the Liberals and from individuals affected by this situation in various ridings in the country, nearly 60 ridings may have experienced a problem with fraudulent or harassing calls.

Basically, calls made to voters, whether it is a person at the end of a line or a robocall, are not a problem in themselves. Many parties use them to give people information or to ask them to go out and vote on election day. So far, there is no problem. However, when people are misinformed, when people pretend to be calling on behalf of Elections Canada to redirect voters to a polling station that quite simply does not exist, the situation becomes problematic and has to be dealt with fairly quickly. More and more people are contacting Elections Canada every day to complain about harassing or even fraudulent calls received during the last campaign.

I have to pause here to say that it is my colleague from Burnaby—Douglas with whom I will be sharing my time.

As I said, more and more people are calling Elections Canada every day to express their concerns about the situation that we are speaking out against today. Some people say they received calls at inappropriate times, very late at night or on religious holidays. Other people are saying they were called by blatantly rude people who introduced themselves as supporters of one party in particular and who then asked them for contributions or tried to find out whom they were going to vote for. And people even received calls from individuals claiming to work for Elections Canada who directed them to new polling stations on the pretext of a last-minute change, when no polling stations had been relocated. We can assume that the fraudulent calls we are talking about here were made simply with the goal of preventing some voters from exercising their fundamental right to vote. This situation is completely unacceptable.

Business of Supply

The right to vote freely, without any constraints and according to one's conscience, is an essential component of democratic societies. It is a constitutionally protected right under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Any attempt to interfere with the election process is a violation of the citizens' basic right to freely express their political choice, and it undermines confidence in our electoral system, which is meant to be democratic.

For a number of years now, corruption, scandals and dirty tricks in politics have generated a great deal of cynicism among the public and have deterred people from voting and expressing their political position. How can we hope to see people regain confidence in Canada's political system and actively participate in elections when unscrupulous individuals organize such election fraud schemes?

Elections Canada claims to have had about 31,000 contacts with citizens who are very worried and concerned about these fraudulent calls across the country. While these contacts are not necessarily all complaints as such, it is clear that Canadians are concerned about this direct attack on Canadian democracy. They want answers and they want to be sure to be represented by people who were elected legitimately. They also want clear rules to ensure that such a situation never occurs again.

• (1345)

The motion introduced by the hon. member for Hamilton Centre seeks precisely to address the concerns and the requests that were clearly expressed by Canadians. It includes three main components. First, that Elections Canada investigation capabilities be strengthened, to include giving the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request certain documents from all political parties. Such a request could be made when needed, if a problematic situation exists, or if there are some concerns.

The motion also asks that all telecommunication companies that deal with political parties and provide voter contact services during a general election be registered with Elections Canada. Lastly, it asks that all clients of telecommunication companies during a general election have their identity registered and verified.

The motion would allow Elections Canada to really be able to fulfill its obligations under the Canada Elections Act. It would provide Elections Canada with the proper tools to investigate when facing anomalous situations or suspecting electoral fraud, as is the case now.

The Chief Electoral Officer intends to use his new investigative powers in the same way as the Auditor General of Canada currently uses his, in other words, to only request documents required for certain specific audits, on an as-needed basis, and not to systematically call on political parties to provide documentation for every election expense. This is not an overly intrusive process. However, it ensures that Elections Canada has the powers required to properly enforce the Elections Act, as per its mandate.

Currently, the Chief Electoral Officer does not have these powers. He is therefore limited in what he can do when it comes time to determine whether certain expenses comply with the Elections Act. No documentation is required to justify election spending. Moreover, any audits carried out by external auditors are solely accounting

exercises that are not designed to determine the legality of election spending, as that is the purview of Elections Canada.

Elections Canada must determine whether election expense reports provided by parties comply with the provisions of the act. In fact, it is on the basis of these reports that parties receive public funds to cover a portion of the cost of their campaigns. With this in mind, I believe that it is essential that Elections Canada have adequate investigative powers so that it can determine whether there has been any misappropriation of public funds, which is often the case where electoral fraud is concerned.

Elections Canada is a designated body that ensures transparency in the electoral process and improved accountability when it comes to the disbursement of public funds to Canada's political parties. So that Elections Canada can fulfill this role and effectively carry out its duties, this body must have all the necessary tools, and it is our responsibility, as parliamentarians, to see that it does.

After the 40th general election, the Chief Electoral Officer submitted a series of recommendations to the Speaker of the House of Commons. It is on the basis of those recommendations that the motion moved by my colleagues was drafted. The New Democrats and Liberals agreed to these requests at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. However, the Conservatives—who are in the majority on this committee—rejected the recommendations on the pretext that they would prefer external auditors to carry out the tasks that should be the purview of the Chief Electoral Officer. We, in the NDP, believe that a non-partisan body must carry out these audits.

For a party that believes it is blameless and that has been complaining that it has been the victim of a smear campaign, its current attitude, which involves accusing and blaming the opposition, is incomprehensible. When people have nothing to hide, there is no need to scratch around for evidence, as they have no problem providing documentation and co-operating fully with Elections Canada, as the NDP has undertaken to do, is already doing and will continue to do throughout the rest of the investigation, and as other parties have undertaken to do.

• (1350)

The Conservatives ask us to take them at their word, but since they have already been found guilty of electoral fraud, they have lost their right to be taken at their word, and they must now substantiate their allegations.

I hope that they are going to support the amended motion.

*Statements by Members**[English]*

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am curious about the member's opinion. These fraudulent calls on election day were very specifically misdirecting people to different voting polls. In some cases, these voting locations did not exist. It happened in Nipissing—Timiskaming to Peggy Walsh Craig; in Sydney—Victoria to Raymond Young; in Guelph to Danny Boyle, who was sent to the Old Quebec Street Mall. In Kingston Arnold Dodds was sent to St. Joseph's Catholic Church. It happened in Windsor—Tecumseh and Saanich—Gulf Islands.

I am curious about this. Do you think this is the work of one rogue person or multiple rogues out there who never communicated with one another and all came up with that idea on that same day, or do you think there was some centrally organized effort on the part of the culprits?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I am really not obliged to express an opinion on the matter.

The hon. member for Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier.

[Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question, which raises some very important considerations relating to the situation now before us.

In my view, it is absolutely incomprehensible to blame a 23-year-old, working in a member's office, for an operation of such scope as to affect nearly 60 ridings. We simply cannot blame this person, who in any case has spoken up and said that he was not responsible.

I think that Elections Canada must be able to have access to all the necessary documents from all political parties in the House, including the government. This will enable it to conduct the necessary investigations, ascertain the full extent of the fraud, and determine the organization that was necessary to carry out this operation.

• (1355)

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her excellent speech.

I would like to ask her what makes a motion such as this so important in terms of ethics and respect. More and more voters are simply avoiding election campaigns. They want nothing to do with politicians or with federal, provincial or even municipal politics. If we can strengthen Elections Canada's powers to make voting more honest and to ensure that choices are respected, that could make things better for us here. It could make voting more vital, more serious.

So what makes this motion today so serious and so important?

Ms. Éline Michaud: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Compton—Stanstead for that very important question. I also thank him for his energy and for the passion he demonstrates when he speaks in the House.

I am happy to have the opportunity to return to the whole question of cynicism and the significance of a vote. I touched upon this briefly in my speech, but it is something that is tremendously important to us. It speaks to the viability of our political system, of

our democracy, which depends on voters' confidence in our electoral system.

When they express their choice, voters must be certain that they will be respected and that the process will take its course without certain individuals or certain organizations attempting to interfere with the vote and the electoral process.

In that sense, the motion moved by my colleagues is tremendously important, because it provides certain guarantees of verification. We will be certain that a non-partisan body will be able to make the necessary verifications and ensure that the law is respected.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her excellent speech.

At present we need to strengthen the investigative capabilities of Elections Canada. However, I have a question that follows on the excellent motion by the NDP. What does my colleague think about the actual accountability of Elections Canada? The NGO Democracy Watch says that there are plenty of investigations, but that afterward there is not much information about the reasons, results and decisions of Elections Canada.

Ms. Éline Michaud: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her excellent question, which takes this whole matter to another level.

I think that, with more extensive investigative capabilities to gather more information, it will subsequently be easier for Elections Canada to issue results and to follow up on investigations. It is for this reason that it is important to extend Elections Canada's powers, so that it can seek out the necessary documents and ensure that they are not hidden and shelved and that any evidence of fraud does not disappear.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

ONTARIO JUNIOR CITIZEN OF THE YEAR AWARDS

Mr. Kyle Seebach (Brampton West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate several young people from the great city of Brampton who have been chosen as nominees for the 2011 Ontario Junior Citizen of the Year Awards.

Each year the Ontario Community Newspapers Association recognizes individuals between the ages of 6 and 17 who are working to make a difference in their communities and around the world. These exemplary individuals go above and beyond what is expected of someone their age. They look past their own needs and inspire those around them to give rather than to take. They are truly the leaders of tomorrow.

Young people are chosen from across the province each year for this prestigious award. I am pleased to say that this year Brampton had eight nominees: Stacey Noronha, Anna Akoto, Dhruv Bhalla, Althea Camarillo, Shekhar Kumar, Hersh Bansal, and Raineisha Griffith, and Ashmandeep Kroad.

I congratulate each and every one of them and wish them the best of luck in the future.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today I am happy to stand with my colleagues as we join people and nations around the globe to celebrate International Women's Day.

As young women, we have made many gains from our mothers and grandmothers. However, our work is not done and things are not getting any easier for women in Canada.

Since 2006, women in Canada have been the victims of a systemic attack. We have seen the slashing of funding for women's groups, the cancellation of funding for women's advocacy groups, the closure of 16 Status of Women Canada offices, the abolishment of the court challenges program, the elimination of pay equity, the scrapping of the long gun registry, a constant attack on unions and collective bargaining rights, and no child care funding initiatives. What is next is an attack on pensions and OAS, public service job cuts, cuts to services for Canadians, and the building of more prisons. Canadian women deserve better.

New Democrats are proud of the number of women and young women in our caucus who will continue to fight to protect the rights of women and work toward a Canada with gender equality.

* * *

● (1400)

MARKHAM STOUFFVILLE HOSPITAL

Mr. Paul Calandra (Oak Ridges—Markham, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to talk about some more good news in my community and to wish Markham Stouffville Hospital a happy 22nd birthday.

When Markham Stouffville Hospital opened 22 years ago, it was built to serve a community of some 77,000 people. Today it serves over 330,000 people in the Markham Stouffville and Uxbridge areas.

The hospital is undergoing a large expansion which will see more operating rooms, 100 new patient beds, and of course something that is very dear to me, an expanded maternity ward. My two daughters, Natalie and Olivia, were born there. Because of the great service of the doctors and nurses, I have two healthy, wonderful children.

The Markham Stouffville Hospital is one of the greatest hospitals in the province of Ontario. My community raised millions of dollars to support the expansion.

I wish a happy 22nd birthday to Markham Stouffville Hospital. I thank the hospital for all the great work it does for our community.

* * *

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today is International Women's Day and men and women in all parts of Canada are gathering to celebrate equality rights. 2012 also marks the 30th anniversary of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the document that codified many of the legal rights we are celebrating today.

Earlier this morning I met with a group of people, and I was truly inspired by the energy and strength in the room. For example, there

Statements by Members

was one group of young people from Queen's University who woke up at 4 a.m. just to be here today to celebrate the accomplishments of women.

That dedication is exactly the kind of spirit that has helped to advance the cause for equality rights over the past century. It is exactly the kind of spirit that will ensure advances continue to be made in the future.

On behalf of the people of York West and all Canadians, I am proud to stand to pay tribute to those past trailblazers for equality, and I am excited to tip my hat to the pioneers of tomorrow.

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OTTAWA MACDONALD-CARTIER INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Ottawa Macdonald-Cartier International Airport has shown the power of privatization in the transportation field.

Airports Council International announced in February that Ottawa finished first in North America, and second in the world among those airports serving two to five million passengers a year.

This airport offers \$2.2 billion in economic impact, and 10,000 direct and indirect jobs. I congratulate its employees and its brilliant CEO, Paul Benoit.

As respected columnist Mark Sutcliffe pointed out, since privatization 15 years ago, the airport has doubled its passengers, tripled its revenue, and gone from a dilapidated money loser to a money maker that is among the best of its kind in North America.

Much needed spending reductions in the coming budget offer us the chance to free up the economy, privatize more and see more success stories, just like the Ottawa Macdonald-Cartier International Airport.

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[Translation]

THÉRÈSE CASGRAIN

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today being International Women's Day, I wish to recognize the important contribution made by the women of Quebec on the long, hard road towards gender equality in Canada.

In Quebec, if there is one name that is synonymous with that struggle, it is of course Thérèse Casgrain. This great woman was at the heart of every battle and debate in what was at the time a rapidly changing society. She fought for many causes that redefined society.

Her efforts later brought her into the political realm, with the NDP, among other parties, and she was appointed to the Senate in 1970.

Most importantly, however, Thérèse Casgrain left all women a legacy to carry on and one over-riding duty: to continue to work towards true gender equality.

Statements by Members

That is why I am pleased to pursue the same goals as the organization founded by Ms. Casgrain, the Fédération des femmes du Québec, which advocates for the right to abortion, pay equity and women's safety, to name a few. Together, we can continue her fight. Let's get the job done.

* * *

● (1405)

[English]

HARRIET TUBMAN

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Mr. Speaker, March 10 marks the 99th anniversary of the death of Harriet Tubman, an inspirational figure who risked her life many times to rescue slaves. Through the bravery of this woman and others working on the Underground Railroad, thousands of former slaves escaped to Canada and to my riding of St. Catharines to begin their new lives.

In the 1850s, Harriet attended the BME Church on Geneva Street, which was a meeting place for the civil rights movement. The BME Church still stands in St. Catharines and it remains active.

The church is asking this House to proclaim March 10 as Harriet Tubman day to commemorate the work she did in rescuing people from slavery and campaigning to abolish slavery in America. Canadians are proud of the role that Harriet Tubman and her supporters in St. Catharines played in advancing the cause of freedom. I ask my hon. colleagues for their support.

On the very day we are celebrating International Women's Day, Harriet Tubman was a woman who showed what leadership was all about, regardless of sex, religion or colour. She was an amazing woman who stood for what we have today, freedom in our country and in North America.

* * *

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Ms. Wai Young (Vancouver South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, two weeks ago Vancouver hosted the largest international gathering of leading scientists, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, or AAAS, conference. For the first time in over 30 years, the conference was held outside the United States. A new record was set in that attendance rose from 9,000 to over 12,000 participants.

It was during this conference that one of the world's leading subatomic physics laboratories, Vancouver-based TRIUMF, announced a major breakthrough with a new technology using cyclotrons, already available in hospitals, to successfully produce medical isotopes without needing uranium or nuclear reactors. This development allows hospitals with existing cyclotrons to make the isotopes they need locally on site, which will reduce the wait time for critical diagnostic tests.

TRIUMF credits much of this success to the ingenuity of its team and the foresight and the strong financial support of this government.

I invite members to join me in congratulating TRIUMF for its leadership and for this amazing new discovery.

[Translation]

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, despite a record number of women elected to the current Parliament, Canada still ranks poorly internationally when it comes to the representation of women in politics. I would like to point out that Canada ranks behind Afghanistan.

The UN estimates that a critical mass of 30% women is needed in order for them to have an impact on public policy. However, in Canada, we have not yet passed the 25% mark.

There are only so many ways to improve the situation. The political parties have to take measures to encourage the election of women.

The NDP has tools in place, and the results speak for themselves, with 40% of our caucus being women.

Every party should do its part for women's equality, and the Conservative Party should—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Saint Boniface.

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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Saint Boniface, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadian men and women are all invited to celebrate International Women's Week, and especially International Women's Day, which is today.

Our theme this year is “Strong Women, Strong Canada — Women in Rural, Remote and Northern Communities: Key to Canada's Economic Prosperity”.

This theme reminds us that we live in a very large country, where one in five women lives outside major urban centres.

[English]

To support this theme, the government is taking action. In fact, the Minister for Status of Women has announced support for new projects to support women living in communities outside Canada's urban centres. These projects aim to reduce violence against women and girls and increase their economic security. We all must play our part to deliver on the theme of “Strong Women, Strong Canada”.

* * *

● (1410)

STATUS OF WOMEN

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, despite mounting cases of missing and murdered aboriginal women and children, the government still ignores calls for a national inquiry by the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, the Native Women's Association of Canada, Sisters in Spirit, Amnesty International and the women's families. The Liard Aboriginal Women's Society is pleading with the government to restore funds for its programs addressing the high rates of violence and drug and alcohol abuse, attributed in particular to the impact of residential schools.

*Statements by Members***RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission reports paying out double the anticipated compensation claims for abuse suffered at the residential schools. They call the schools an assault on aboriginal children, their families and their culture, and on self-government and sustainability. They said we should restore funding to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in this budget.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women have decried Canada's inaction on the poverty and violence suffered by aboriginal women.

Again, I implore the government to open Canada's doors to the UN investigators and as a show of good faith call the long-awaited national inquiry into—

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Calgary East.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today the Minister of Foreign Affairs completed a historic visit to Burma, the first of its kind. While there, he met with several high-ranking members of the government, including the president and foreign minister. They discussed the latest developments in human rights and democracy, the situation of ethnic minorities and Canada's hope for a better and brighter Burma.

As the world celebrated International Women's Day, the minister also had a great opportunity to meet with the Nobel laureate, honorary Canadian citizen and one of Burma's great champions of change, Aung San Suu Kyi. Canada has been a strong opponent of her oppression in Burma, and while several very positive steps have been taken, we hope that the progress to date will continue to lead to further reform. Change must be sustained so that the aspiration for a better and brighter future for the Burmese people is realized by all.

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WORLD KIDNEY DAY

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today is World Kidney Day. This year's theme is transplantation. We recall, just a few months ago, when this House took note of the importance of encouraging more Canadians to fill out organ donation cards.

The aim of World Kidney Day is to raise awareness of the importance of kidneys to our overall health and to reduce the frequency and impact of kidney disease and its associated health problems worldwide. An estimated 2.6 million Canadians have kidney disease or are at risk of it. The number of Canadians treated for kidney failure has tripled over the last 20 years. Nearly 80% of the over 4,300 Canadians on the waiting list for organ transplantation are waiting for a kidney. In 2010, a third of the people who died while waiting for organs were waiting for a kidney.

Yet Canada remains one of the only industrialized countries without a national system to support organ donation and transplantation. Together we can make a difference. People should let their families know their wishes and fill out their organ donation cards. Save a life.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, freedom of religion is something that is enjoyed by all Canadians. Canadians practise whichever religion they choose without fear of oppression or silencing by those who disagree with them. Unfortunately, this freedom is not enjoyed throughout the world.

March 2 marked one year since the horrific murder of Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's minister of minority affairs. On March 2, 2011, Minister Bhatti was assassinated by gunmen who ambushed his car in broad daylight. Mr. Bhatti was the only Christian member of Pakistan's cabinet and was assassinated for his strong criticism of Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

Canadians and the supporters of religious freedoms around the world join with International Christian Voice and Shahbaz Bhatti's Canadian brother, Peter, to ensure that his vision will continue. Tragedies like the murder of Shahbaz Bhatti are what prompted our government to establish the Office of Religious Freedom. Our Conservative government is committed to protecting and defending the rights of religious minorities and monitoring the right to freedom of religion. The Office of Religious Freedom will reflect our commitment to promoting and protecting—

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Hull—Aylmer.

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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, International Women's Day is a remarkable time when the world stops to remember and celebrate.

[*Translation*]

I have spent my life defending women's right to pay equity, maternity leave and work-life balance. That is why I am so proud to be leading a party that fights every day for gender equality. I am proud that the NDP caucus has the largest proportion of women in Canadian history. Together, the New Democrats fight for justice, fairness, equal opportunity and the freedom to live without fear. There is still work to be done.

One by one, the Conservatives are erasing the victories won by women.

● (1415)

[*English*]

Canada has fallen to 20th position on the UN gender inequality index, but there is hope. We have come far; we must go further. New Democrats will continue to fight for women's rights. Together we can get it done.

*Oral Questions***ATTACK ON RESERVIST**

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Mr. Speaker, something happened on Tuesday that sparked outrage in Nanaimo and across the country. About 10:40 in the evening, a young Canadian Forces reservist was waiting for a bus. He was in uniform when he was attacked without warning and without provocation by a young assailant with a knife. Although his throat was slashed, he was able to summon help from a nearby restaurant. He was treated by paramedics, stitched up in hospital and has been released.

While we are all relieved that the reservist will make a full recovery, news of the attack has shocked our community. Canadians are proud of the fine men and women who serve in our armed forces. The Nanaimo regiment is part of the Canadian Scottish Regiment. Reservists train one night a week and one weekend a month. Many of our reservists have volunteered for overseas deployment in places like Bosnia, the Middle East, Africa and for our current mission in Afghanistan. They have aided in domestic crises like the B.C. forest fires, the Manitoba flood and the Ontario and Quebec ice storm.

Nanaimo citizens are proud of our reservists. We are calling for anyone with information to assist police in bringing this cowardly assailant to face the justice he deserves.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

ELECTIONS CANADA

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have reversed course and will now support the NDP's motion on cleaning up election fraud. This motion has received support from all parties. We can work together after all.

After this motion passes, will the Prime Minister respect the will of Parliament and introduce amendments to the Elections Act within six months?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government has clearly indicated its position on this matter before the House of Commons. At the same time, we obviously encourage all parties to co-operate with Elections Canada. Elections Canada already has significant powers and resources and there is no reason for any party not to co-operate with its inquiries.

* * *

[Translation]

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today, *La Presse* revealed shocking recordings of calls made by RMG on behalf of the government, aggressive calls made to seniors by people who used insults and intimidation to get money for the Conservative Party.

Why did RMG make these calls on the government's behalf? Why are the Conservatives still dealing with RMG? Is it because RMG and the Conservative Party are one and the same?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know exactly what the opposition is talking about,

but I am aware of one case where RMG dismissed an employee. This employee was dismissed before the election, and we always uphold our standards.

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister must take responsibility. He created a culture of victory at any cost within his party. That is what matters. It is true of the Conservative Party, their allies, their voter suppression school and their bagman, RMG, which harasses people and calls them separatists and socialists if they do donate money.

The Prime Minister must know where these types of insults originated. He must be aware. He must tell us.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think I just answered that question.

[English]

I think I very clearly answered the specifics of the case in question. In terms of the more general allegation, obviously this is just simply a smear without foundation.

What I would say is this: the Conservative party always accepts the verdict of the voters. We have accepted the verdict of the voters when we have won and also when we have lost. I would encourage the other parties to accept the verdict of voters as well.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this morning, like others, I was shocked to hear the recorded fundraising calls of one Don Duke calling on behalf of the Conservative party. In these calls he treats people on the other end of the line like dirt, all in the name of filling up the Conservative war chest. The company doing the calling, RMG, received over \$1.3 million from local Conservative campaigns and an unknown amount from the central campaign.

How much did the Conservative war chest grow from these strong-arm tactics?

● (1420)

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am aware that a single individual was in fact fired for not upholding the very clear standards that this party holds itself to. We are very proud of the standards that we have set forth. Obviously, Canadians have supported us in that because they have in fact voted for Conservatives right across the country.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives cannot write this off by just saying it was some sort of isolated situation. The fact is, RMG merged with Xentel, which has similar dubious tactics. In February 2010, Xentel was fined \$500,000 by the CRTC for violating Canada's do not call list. It was also charged \$75,000 in Missouri for "manipulative, high-pressure techniques to solicit donations". Does that sound familiar?

Oral Questions

The Conservatives are accusing the NDP of demeaning voters when we ask tough questions. However, what could be more demeaning than funding Xentel and RMG's unethical behaviour?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we make no apologies for the fact that our party has very high standards. If someone does not hold up to those very high standards, then in fact we expect companies to act. In this case, the company did act and removed a single individual and let that individual go.

However, it is interesting to hear these kinds of smears and baseless allegations coming from the NDP members when they themselves, in fact just last fall, had to return donation cheques to folks when they were trying to direct money into the Broadbent Institute, contrary to the Elections Act. They know full well they did that.

* * *

ELECTIONS CANADA

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, with great respect to the Prime Minister, I am still trying to figure out the exact position of his party with respect to the motions that are being debated today together with the amendments.

Could the Prime Minister give us his assurance today that the government will in fact support additional powers to the Chief Electoral Officer that will apply not only to future elections, but the election just passed and to previous elections? Will he give us that guarantee and also guarantee that the government will be forthcoming with legislation within a very short period of time?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the government has been very clear in its decision on the matters before the House today. If the opposition has any other useful suggestions in terms of legislation, I would encourage it to bring forward detailed proposals.

None of this in any way obscures the responsibility of all political parties, including the Liberal Party, to provide Elections Canada with all information needed.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, with all due respect, the Prime Minister did not answer my question. My question is very simple and direct, and the Prime Minister keeps dodging it.

Does the government agree that the additional powers proposed in the NDP's motion today will apply not only to future elections but to the election just passed? Can he assure us that amendments will be made in the near future, as is clearly set out in the NDP's amended motion?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government has indicated its support for today's proposals and encourages the opposition to bring forward any constructive suggestions. If the opposition has any detailed proposals, we would be happy to hear them. At the same time, it is important that all the parties, including the Liberal Party, cooperate with Elections Canada's investigations.

[*English*]

HEALTH

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Ontario health minister today made a very important statement with respect to the issue of drugs and access to drugs. I am sure the Prime Minister will know that there is a major problem facing hospitals right across the country with respect to drug shortages. The Ontario minister made it very clear that the provincial government had not received advance warning with respect to drug shortages.

This is a very serious issue across the country. It does not just affect one province, it affects patients across the country with respect to elective surgery. This is a major issue for the country.

Could the Prime Minister tell us why the regulations seemed to have been so failing at this—

● (1425)

The Speaker: The right hon. Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, everyone is aware of this issue. Certain provinces have undertaken to sole source certain critical medications.

The Minister of Health has indicated that Health Canada is working on a range of options and solutions, including the fast-tracking of approvals for that problem. We work with and encourage provinces to find multiple sources for vital medication.

* * *

[*Translation*]

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this morning we heard a first sample of the type of fundraising that RMG does for this government. We heard a telephone operator insult voters and behave like a bum. An expert even said that these calls amounted to harassment. Lack of respect, harassment, intimidation: for the Conservative Party anything goes when it comes to collecting money.

Is this government really comfortable with the idea that its election was paid with harassment calls?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, RMG fired that employee.

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, some are losing their voice, but when one does not have anything intelligent to say, it is sometimes difficult to say it loud and clear.

Each day brings a new potential scandal, which undermines people's confidence in our electoral system a little more every time. It is now in Eglinton—Lawrence, in Toronto, that revelations are surfacing. Dozens of non-listed electors were able to vote without having to provide an address, in blatant violation of the Canada Elections Act.

Even though new revelations keep surfacing, this government continues to talk about isolated incidents, to insult the Canadians who are filing complaints and fighting for their rights. When will this government stop making light of this electoral fraud?

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, Elections Canada is responsible for voter registration, not political parties. Given the history of the person making the allegations, Elections Canada may want to take a very close into this matter.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, contracts signed by Conservative MPs with RMG make one thing clear: scripts are created in consultation with clients. RMG was not working on its own.

The Minister of Finance, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, the Minister of Natural Resources, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and the Minister of Canadian Heritage spent over \$96,000 on RMG in the last campaign.

Did their campaigns fund the misdirection of voters? Could just one of them stand today and tell Canadians what the campaigns paid RMG to say?

The Speaker: I would like to remind members that their questions have to touch on the administrative responsibilities of government, not political financing.

I see the hon. parliamentary secretary rising to answer, so I will allow him a chance to do so.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that clarification for the member.

Let me be clear. Our party has very high standards. We have already indicated that. We also have provided full transparency to Elections Canada. What is also clear is that the opposition parties have spent millions of dollars to make thousands of calls right across the country, but they have not provided the same transparency to Elections Canada. Before continuing their baseless smears in the House, they should prove their own callers were not behind the calls they allege.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, clearly Mark Twain was right when he said, "Denial ain't just a river in Egypt".

Let us look at what else the RMG contract says. It says that it collects all data from these calls and transfers them to the Conservative database. The Conservative database holds the key to uncovering who in the affected ridings could have accessed call lists and how he or she used that information.

Will the Conservative government follow the NDP's lead in helping Elections Canada get to the bottom of this voter fraud by completely opening its books and its database to investigators?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as we have said continuously in the House, everything is available to Elections Canada. We are assisting Elections Canada. We have no reason not to. We have provided it full transparency.

The same cannot be said of the party across the way. What we know is that opposition parties paid millions of dollars to make thousands of phone calls. Before continuing these baseless smears,

they should prove their own callers are not behind these reports. They should provide full transparency to Elections Canada.

* * *

● (1430)

SENIORS

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a shocking 46.5% of elderly Canadian women live alone in poverty. This is double the poverty rate for elderly men in Canada. Seniors' poverty particularly touches aboriginal and immigrant women.

Will the government implement a real strategy to fight poverty and make reforms to our pension system to lift all senior women out of poverty?

Hon. Alice Wong (Minister of State (Seniors), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the fact remains that our government is working hard for all seniors. It was our government that introduced a low tax plan that removed thousands of seniors from the tax rolls completely. It was our government that introduced pension income splitting and the largest GIS increase in a quarter century. It was her party that voted against all of these.

Canadians know that they can count on this government to deliver for seniors.

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister cannot deny the facts. There are still thousands of elderly women who live below the poverty line, and successive governments have not been able to help them.

How can the government now say with certainty that future generations will be able to adjust to the changes announced to old age security? The minister has already told us that the Conservative government intends to make cuts to old age security. We already know that.

How will changes to the pension plan affect elderly people, women aged 55 who live below the poverty line, and future generations?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have already told the hon. member a number of times, 65 year old women will not lose one penny following the changes to old age security. People who are close to retirement will not lose any money either. Younger people will have a lot of time to adjust to a system that will ensure the sustainability of old age security, now and for future generations.

*Oral Questions***STATUS OF WOMEN**

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, five years ago, the Conservatives cut funding to organizations that do research for women and about women, organizations seeking to eliminate the inequality that women face every day. Without research and awareness-raising activities, Canadian women will never be able to achieve genuine equality.

On this International Women's Day, will the minister commit to restoring funding for research and awareness?

[English]

Mrs. Susan Truppe (Parliamentary Secretary for Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has increased funding for women to its highest level ever. Since 2007, we have approved millions of dollars in projects designed to help end violence against women and girls. We are working hard with Canadians across the country to promote greater economic prosperity for women and girls. More groups are applying than ever before because our practical approach is working.

[Translation]

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that funding is just a band-aid solution. It is not enough. Women deserve a government that stands up for them, not a government that cancels child care agreements and introduces a bill that attacks pay equity. We will not sit back and watch. We will not abandon the fight for gender equality.

How much longer will we have to wait for the Conservatives to do something?

[English]

Mrs. Susan Truppe (Parliamentary Secretary for Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I said, our government has increased funding for women to its highest level ever. We are always working hard with Canadians across the country to promote greater economic prosperity for women and girls. More groups have applied, as I said, because our practical approach is working.

* * *

[Translation]

PUBLIC SERVICE OF CANADA

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we learned today that the Treasury Board wants \$16 million to create a litigation management unit to handle disputes with its unions and employees. The Conservatives are preparing for war with workers. This is a very bad sign.

Why create a hit squad to attack government workers? Is it to freeze workers' salaries or are the Conservatives planning once again to go after workers' rights to collective bargaining in the upcoming budget?

• (1435)

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there are processes in place to deal with these issues. Budget 2012 has an action plan to reduce unemployment and improve the Canadian economy.

[English]

That is our plan of action. I believe our plans will involve the public service, but also society in general.

* * *

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it was not just voter-suppression calls in the last election. At least in the greater Toronto area there was clear evidence of voter augmentation, with scores of people who were not on the voters list being allowed to vote without any proof of residence. In York Centre and Etobicoke Centre there was reportedly hundreds of instant voters. In Eglinton—Lawrence, it was nearly 3,000.

Has the government asked Elections Canada to investigate this apparent abuse of our democratic process and if not, why not?

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will remind the hon. member that Elections Canada is responsible for voter registration, not political parties.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Eduardo Harari lives in the riding of York Centre. Last election he got a phone call asking if he would be voting Conservative. He said no. Later he got a call, claiming to be from Elections Canada, saying his voting station had been moved to a location on Wilson Avenue, which turned out to be a vacant lot.

Could the government categorically deny that anyone associated with the Conservative campaign had any role in fraudulently misdirecting Mr. Harari?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Once again, Mr. Speaker, I can categorically deny that. In fact, here is what we do know. These exaggerated allegations demean millions of voters who cast legitimate votes in the last election. The opposition paid millions of dollars to make hundreds of thousands of calls. Before continuing these baseless smears, those members should prove their own callers are not in fact behind these reports.

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, although we cannot read the textbook from voter suppression school, the emerging pattern gives away the curriculum.

Mr. Dodds, a Conservative supporter in Kingston, was called several times by a Conservative caller until he said that because of the prison farm closure, he would not vote Conservative. On election day he received a call, which sounded like the same person, directing him to the wrong poll.

Oral Questions

Can the Conservatives explain why we keep seeing this pattern?

The Speaker: I once again remind members that their questions have to touch on the administrative responsibility of government.

I see the hon. parliamentary secretary rise again, so I will give him the floor.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, while voters make determinations on who to support for a number of reasons, I understand a lot of voters in the last election made the determination not to support higher taxes and wasteful spending. That is what the Liberals proposed.

These exaggerated allegations demean millions of voters who cast legitimate votes in the last election. The opposition paid millions of dollars to make hundreds of thousands of phone calls. Before continuing these baseless smears, they should prove their own callers are not behind these reports.

* * *

[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives often use a company that is known for having killed many civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan for training our troops. Blackwater's past was so dark and its image so bad that it had to change its name to Xe. Xe has become the Conservatives' company of choice for training our soldiers. The government uses its services regularly on untendered contracts.

Why is there no call for tenders when the government hires a foreign private company to train our troops?

• (1440)

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): As always, Mr. Speaker, that is not true.

[English]

Academi has facilities in North Carolina that offer a number of technical ranges that we do not have here in Canada.

We contract facilities for short periods of time as a most cost-effective means of investing in our troops for training, as opposed to building fixed expensive infrastructure here in Canada. We use these technical ranges for specialized skill enhancement, such as defensive driving.

We continue to invest in ensuring that we have the best trained forces in the world.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if this government truly wanted to do what is best for our troops, it would certainly not do business with the company formerly known as Blackwater. Many other companies can offer specialized training. Many other companies respect the Geneva convention and many other companies are in a better position to promote Canadian values.

Does the government have any idea what the word “integrity” means? Why does it constantly use a company that is charged with

war crimes, and why does it award that company untendered contracts?

[English]

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Yes, Mr. Speaker, once again the Canadian Forces are always investing in the best training, the best equipment and the best support. The member opposite could take a lesson from that.

We always ensure that the Canadian Forces have access to the best training facilities to enhance their abilities. In this case, Academi, the facilities in North Carolina used for this limited purpose, has excellent facilities. These are facilities that we do not have available at certain times of the year in Canada, due to weather conditions and the fixed infrastructure investment necessary.

If the member opposite wants to ask questions about this, she can ask them at committee next week.

* * *

[Translation]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday we learned that the Conservatives' expensive prison agenda called for the construction of new double-bunked cells.

The facts are these. Double-bunking increases violence, threatens the safety of guards and allows disease to spread more easily. The Correctional Investigator says it is “unsafe” and is a “violation of human rights”.

Do the Conservatives hope to solve the problem of overcrowding by increasing the number of people in cells? It is their bill, and it is their responsibility to explain the consequences of it to us.

[English]

Ms. Candice Hooppner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting the NDP are again concerned with the morale of inmates. Double bunking is a common practice used in western countries. We use it as a temporary measure when needed. We want to put the rights of victims ahead of the rights of prisoners. We want our corrections system to actually correct criminal behaviour.

[Translation]

Ms. Charmaine Borg (Terrebonne—Blainville, NDP): Mr. Speaker, correctional officers are also at risk of being victims of the Conservatives' new measures. One third of federal prisons will have double-bunking within three years. That is one in three. This is contrary to the international standards that Canada has undertaken to abide by. Prison workers say that double-bunking is one of the most dangerous things for correctional officers.

Why are the Conservatives promoting these dangerous practices? Working in prisons is already difficult enough.

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Ms. Candice Hooppner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, double occupancy is a common practice in western countries. It is done in other countries. We will always comply with our UN obligations.

* * *

BURMA

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada has been a strong opponent of repression in Burma. Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs is currently in Burma on his first official visit by a Canadian foreign minister to that country. While there, he officially presented Aung San Suu Kyi with a certificate signifying her honorary citizenship of Canada.

Could the Prime Minister please update all Canadians on the significance of the minister's visit?

[Translation]

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 2007, our government was proud to name Aung San Suu Kyi an honorary Canadian citizen. On International Women's Day, we all salute her long, peaceful and courageous struggle against oppression.

[English]

Canada has long supported democratic reforms in Burma. In 2007, our government, indeed all of Parliament, was proud to name Aung San Suu Kyi an honorary Canadian citizen. On International Women's Day we want to salute her long and courageous struggle for democracy and human rights.

* * *

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in 2008, when he was president of the Montreal Alouettes, Larry Smith partnered with the David Suzuki Foundation to make the Alouettes a carbon-neutral, environmentally friendly team. Mr. Smith was a strong supporter of the foundation back then. Just yesterday, failed Conservative candidate and Senator Larry Smith lectured the David Suzuki Foundation on its policies. It is funny that he has changed his mind now that he is a member of the Conservative caucus.

My question is for the environment minister. Is there a concerted effort by the Conservative government to go after the Suzuki Foundation and other environmental organizations?

• (1445)

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the answer is short and the answer is "no".

[Translation]

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in 2008, Senator Smith stated that it was necessary to demonstrate the importance we place on the environment in order to protect it, as the David Suzuki Foundation does. Now, he is saying that the David Suzuki Foundation is "promoting American businesses".

That change was dictated by his Conservative mentors, who want to wage war on environmentalists. They are attacking Canadians

who want to do something tangible to protect the environment. Why?

[English]

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are all aware of recent media stories that have drawn attention to suggested inappropriate involvement of certain registered charities and political activities. I can assure the House that Canada's tax system has long and clearly prohibited registered charities from participating in partisan activity and limited their political activities.

In order to protect Canadian interests, we have a duty to ensure that these organizations are operating properly and in compliance with Canadian law.

* * *

HEALTH

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Sandoz drug shortage is becoming more and more dangerous every day. Canadians waiting for vital surgeries are worried. Canadians in pain are worried. They have no idea when this drug shortage will stop. Yesterday, the minister said she is disappointed. Well, that is just not good enough.

When will the drug shortage stop? When will the medications from the U.S. and Germany arrive? What is the long-term plan to deal with this drug shortage?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we take the matter very seriously. The NDP members do not. This morning the member for Chicoutimi—Le Fjord filibustered a motion that would deal with this matter at the Standing Committee on Health.

We are doing our part to provide support to the provinces and territories in accessing alternative sources for their drugs. The member should be talking to the member from the health committee. Perhaps the motion will be supported at committee tomorrow.

[Translation]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives are still refusing to explain the impact of this crisis on health. Sandoz was sanctioned because it failed to abide by the rules for ensuring quality. That is why it has had to scale back production.

The only solution from the Minister of Health is to import drugs. The government is doing nothing to avert further shortages or to make sure that the drugs Canadians take are safe.

Are the Conservatives finally going to live up to their responsibilities? Are they going to ensure patient safety, or are they going to assign the job to the American government?

[English]

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have been working around the clock to provide support to the provinces and the territories. We are keenly aware of how important this matter is to patients and their families.

Oral Questions

I want to be very clear that the provinces and territories are best placed to determine what drugs are needed in their jurisdictions. It is the provinces and territories that sign the contracts with industry, not us. As a result of their decision to buy from one sole provider, we gave them the list of companies that are already approved to provide—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Vancouver Centre.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health's mishandling of the drug shortage problem is unacceptable.

For the last year, Liberals have been asking for an investigation and plan to avert shortages and protect patients. The USFDA has a team working with industry to identify and avert these crises. That is what responsible government does.

Instead, Health Canada scrambles to find a band-aid solution to the Sandoz crisis. Global shortages will soon make this impossible. I am getting anxious calls from patients whose pharmacies are unable to fill their prescriptions.

What will the minister do to help them?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I said earlier that it is the provinces and territories that are in the best place to make the determination in terms of what drugs they need for their jurisdictions. They sign the contract with the provider. They know the terms of that contract, more than we do.

They made the decision to purchase drugs from a sole provider that is not able to provide support. We are now dealing with this challenge. We have provided a list of other companies in Canada, approved to produce those drugs, to assist the provinces and territories to look at other sources to get the drugs they need.

• (1450)

[Translation]

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, clearly the government has failed to protect patients' health and safety.

In the Sandoz case, the Conservatives gave their facilities the green light only a few weeks before the American FDA cited serious contamination problems, which it had already identified in 2009.

Why are the Conservatives asleep at the switch? Why do we have to depend on the United States to provide us with assurances of quality control?

[English]

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, as I said earlier, we take the matter very seriously. We are doing our part to provide assistance to the provinces and territories. We have identified alternate companies in Canada approved to provide the drugs that the jurisdictions are now dealing with. We will continue to do that. We are on this 24/7.

* * *

HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner released a report this

morning on malfeasance at HRSDC. A manager at a regional centre misused public funds to buy televisions that went to the manager's home, used a departmental car as a personal vehicle and took public resources to support the manager's own fitness business. No one was able to catch this manager for years. The commissioner said that the department is to blame.

Will the minister stand up and take responsibility for this misuse of public funds?

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us celebrate the good work of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner. He is doing his job under legislation that we created. It is comprehensive. It is designed to root out corruption or other bad practices.

We want to protect the good public servants who are doing a good job, but also find the malfeasors and get them out of the system. Let us congratulate the integrity commissioner.

* * *

[Translation]

STATUS OF WOMEN

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we must remember our responsibilities towards the most vulnerable women.

In Montreal, the number of homeless aboriginal women, especially Inuit women, is increasing at an alarming rate. One of the few resources that helps these women is located in my riding of Laurier—Sainte-Marie, but it will have to close its doors for lack of funding.

When will this government accept its responsibilities towards all women and support the Projets Autochtones du Québec shelter?

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has done a lot to make sure that those who need a home can get one.

We have invested tremendous funds in partnership with the provinces in the delivery of shelters to protect women who have been in a wide range of circumstances. That has been a five year commitment, to provide stable funding to the provinces to look after these women.

It is a darn shame that the opposition, particularly the NDP, voted against help that women need.

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in developing nations strong and healthy women are often the key drivers of economic growth. They grow crops, they run businesses, they care for children and they perform the majority of domestic chores.

Oral Questions

On this International Women's Day 2012, could the Minister of International Cooperation please update the House on how the government is taking action and delivering real results for women's economic empowerment around the world?

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague's question is an important question every day of the year, not just on International Women's Day.

Forty per cent of the world's labour force is women but they still earn much less. Forty-three per cent of agricultural workers in the world are women but they only own 10% of the land.

By being targeted, we are ensuring that Canada's development money will be used effectively and will get results. The government is doing that. We are focusing on women entrepreneurs in developing countries, women farmers, as well as the rights and—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Toronto Centre.

* * *

•(1455)

PENSIONS

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Human Resources.

When she talks about how people in their forties and fifties can start planning for the great day of cut off with respect to old age security, what she needs to understand is that that is affecting low income women, and I say this on International Women's Day, more than it is affecting any other group of people in the country.

I challenge her to come down to Regent Park in my riding or come down to any other low income area and lecture people about their financial planning and how they are getting room for their financial planning in the future.

The government should be ashamed of cutting the one program, the GIS and—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources.

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the only people I have heard talk about cutting the GIS are the Liberals. He just did it.

What we are talking about is preserving the old age security system, including the GIS, for today's seniors and for future generations. It will take a lot of time to implement a program like this but it is important that we do it to protect our seniors. Anyone who is currently receiving OAS and GIS will not lose a penny. Those who are near retirement will not lose a penny. Those others will have time to adjust their plans so they can have a good future.

* * *

[*Translation*]

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have one of the most dismal records when it comes to reuniting immigrant families. The minister wants to make matters worse by reducing immigration to a strictly economic consideration and allowing companies to choose who can immigrate to Canada. That is the wrong approach.

The NDP believes that the immigration system must be fair, efficient and transparent and that it must expedite the reunification of families.

Will the minister continue to create obstacles for families, or will he accept the NDP suggestions to create an efficient and compassionate immigration system?

[*English*]

Mr. Rick Dykstra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the fact is that the member has her facts incorrect. This year, in 2012, we will increase from an average of 15,000 parents and grandparents coming to our country to be reunified with their families to 25,000.

We have a backlog to deal with. On this side of the House, whether it is family reunification, refugee responsibility or the foreign skilled worker programs, we are prepared to act. We are prepared to move because the economy depends upon it.

* * *

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are all saddened by the tragic death of Burton Winters. Recently, the Minister of National Defence requested that the Chief of Defence Staff conduct a review of Canada's search and rescue protocols in the wake of this tragedy.

As is normal practice for ground search and rescue events in Canada, civilian assets were requested by the province to assist in the search. In this case, the Canadian Forces was contacted 20 hours after the young man went missing.

Could the minister please inform us of the results of this review?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, our condolences go out to the loved ones of Burton Winters.

While the legal authority for ground search and rescue does rest with the provincial and territorial governments, the Canadian Forces, as a partner in the search and rescue network, nevertheless, reviewed the protocol surrounding Canadian Forces participation in this search.

In future, the Canadian Forces will implement a call back protocol to ensure continuous communications on ground searches in order to enhance awareness of changing circumstances and the potential need of Canadian Forces participation. This ongoing dialogue will continue until the file is closed. This new protocol will enhance the capabilities of all partners to our search and rescue network across Canada.

Points of Order

[Translation]

AIR TRANSPORTATION

Ms. Éleine Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, four Quebec ministers have added their names to the long list of people who oppose the airport project in Neuville. The ministers pointed out that this project violates Quebec laws. The Conservatives seem to have forgotten that being a federation means working with the provinces.

Will the Conservatives stop acting unilaterally? Will the Minister of Transport finally listen to the public and intervene to put an end to this project that the residents of Neuville simply do not want?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is odd that the mayor would sign an agreement with the developers that no one wants. Once again, the hon. member's question demonstrates that she does not understand the complexity of this case. A number of Supreme Court rulings were rendered in similar situations, and this case deserves a great deal of attention. It is the Supreme Court that determined that the federal government has jurisdiction. We are not violating Quebec laws. This falls within our jurisdiction.

We are going to take this very seriously, as we have been doing from the start, and we are going to make a decision. I would, however, like to remind the members of the House that the Minister of Transport's mandate is to promote a very safe airline industry that meets the needs of Canadians, not to stand in its way.

* * *

• (1500)

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, here are the facts regarding the fraudulent calls.

RackNine employees have admitted to making calls to send voters to the wrong polling stations. An employee of RMG, a company that made calls for 18 Conservative candidates in Quebec, was dismissed because of harassment. Furthermore, in the byelection in Rivière-du-Loup in 2009, voters received calls from someone pretending to be the Bloc Québécois candidate.

If the Prime Minister is serious about his willingness to get to the bottom of this, why will he not give greater powers to Elections Canada within six months, whether for past or future elections, and why does he not launch a public inquiry, as the Bloc Québécois has been calling for since February 27?

[English]

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government's position on the motion before the House is clear. However, the fact remains that the opposition spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of phone calls that it made in the last election.

If the opposition wants to support Elections Canada's work, it should provide all its records relating to the phone calls that it made in the last election.

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of the Hon. David Alward, Premier of New Brunswick.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Hon. Bal Gosal (Minister of State (Sport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, before question period, the member for Guelph indicated that our Canadian women's alpine ski team had not won a gold medal since 1971.

I would like to remind the member for Guelph and my colleagues in the House that Canadian women have won 36 gold medals in alpine skiing since 1971. I would like to take this opportunity—

The Speaker: Order, please. I am sure the House appreciates the record being corrected. It may be a point of pride but it is not a point of order.

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during question period, the Minister of Health said that the opposition filibustered a motion made at the health committee this morning.

I was in that committee meeting and I believe that the committee business was discussed in camera. I believe the Minister of Health has violated a rule about talking about in camera proceedings. I would also like to ask the minister how she knew.

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the committee meeting was not in camera. It was televised when the issue of the motion was raised. All of Canada could have watched the proceedings this morning.

The Speaker: I will go back to the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands but so far I am not sure that this is an actual point of order.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Mr. Speaker, in response to the Minister of Health, all the camera people left the room after the witnesses and before the business part of the meeting. I believe it is a violation of the rules to talk about what happened in camera.

The Speaker: I will take that under advisement and get back to the House if necessary.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as a member of the health committee, I was there this morning and the meeting never went in camera. We discussed the future business in public. It was clear in the room that it was a public meeting and therefore the point of order has no merit.

The Speaker: Order, please. I understand it is time for the Thursday Question. The hon. member for Windsor—Tecumseh.

Business of Supply

● (1505)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I stood here in the same place last week and acknowledged that the government had gone a whole five sitting days without moving a time allocation motion and I encouraged the House leader of the government to continue that practice. Therefore, I am quite disappointed standing here today.

[Translation]

They moved not just one time allocation motion on Tuesday, but they moved two such motions. What they are doing is truly undemocratic. I urge the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons once again to put an end to this practice immediately.

[English]

For the coming week, there are a number of issues that are outstanding and unclear so I will list them.

I understand that we have a confirmation that Bill C-10 will come before this House for debate tomorrow and that the vote on Bill C-10 will be put off until Monday evening.

I further understand that Bill C-31, the attack on refugees bill, will come before the House on Tuesday. I would ask the House leader if that is still the case and if it will be before the House for the balance of the week.

With regard to other legislation, I will repeat a question I had earlier for him but never got an answer to. Where is Bill C-30, the Internet snooping bill? When will that be back before the House? Will we ever see it again or is the government just going to dump it?

Finally, could I have a confirmation for the House that the final supply day, which was originally scheduled for Monday, has now been put over to Wednesday and all the votes that will flow subsequent to that will be Wednesday evening?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with the encouragement and support of the opposition House leader, I will continue to try to engage all the House leaders and other parties in an effort to work on consensus approaches as to scheduling matters. I will make the observation that for a dance to work everyone has to be dancing. Therefore, I will continue to make my best efforts.

[Translation]

This afternoon, we will continue debating the opposition day motion from the hon. member for Hamilton Centre.

[English]

Tomorrow we will conclude debate on the amendments coming from the other place, on Bill C-10, the safe streets and communities act. We will have our final vote on this important legislation on Monday night. Bill C-10 will pass a number of important proposals that our government has put forward over the last five years that stand up for victims and for making our communities safer. I might add that Monday will be the 94th sitting day of the House, which means our government will have easily met our election commitment to make this bill law.

[Translation]

Also on Monday, the House will resume debate on Bill C-31, the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act. We will return to this debate on Thursday and Friday.

Tuesday will begin with Bill S-4, the Safer Railways Act. This is an important bill that was nearly passed before the opposition forced an election last year. I hope we will see the debate conclude sometime Tuesday.

If we have extra time on Tuesday, the House will take up a second piece of legislation, Bill C-15, the Strengthening Military Justice in the Defence of Canada Act.

[English]

Wednesday shall be the seventh and final allotted day of the supply cycle. I might correct my friend that I do not think this has ever been designated in the House. We will debate a motion from the New Democratic Party and end the afternoon with two appropriations bills from the President of the Treasury Board.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

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

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak to our opposition day motion. It is an extremely important motion and I am glad to hear it may have the support of all parties, although I am not so sure after hearing comments in question period.

If our motion is passed, it will give the Chief Electoral Officer the power he needs to get his job done. That is really what is at stake here, to ensure our most precious national institution is protected to the fullest extent possible. These tools are needed and have been requested and we believe our motion deserves firm support.

We need to get to the bottom of this so-called robofraud scandal, not just in this immediate instance but for a greater problem in Canada, which is citizen disengagement. Voter turnout is dropping in the country. In 1950 voter turnout was close to 80%. In the last election, it was just over 60%. That 20 percentage point drop should be a warning sign. All the bells should be going off that something is desperately wrong in Canada and it needs fixing.

Business of Supply

At the current rate of decline, I can see voter turnout dropping below the 50% level some time in the near future. It was not too long ago that we used to poke fun at the United States for its low turnout levels. Now we are almost mimicking exactly the same levels of turnout. This is a huge problem and I propose that this is not due to apathy or disinterested citizens sitting on their hands. It is part of a large problem, which really has to do with the work of political parties. Currently, all parties contact supporters. That is the heart of this process and what we do throughout all campaigns, but there is a concerted effort often to discourage voters. Because resources are often so tight for campaigns, political parties tend to ignore non-voters.

This has a cumulative effect that was acknowledged by the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform back in the early 1990s. This cumulative effect means that our turnout will continue to drop lower and lower, and we have to do something to fix it. Unfortunately, very little from the very well-conducted Royal Commission on Electoral Reform was implemented. However, I have to compliment my colleagues across the room. They have done a couple of things that are worth noting. One is bringing in legislation for fixed election dates and tougher spending limits on political parties. Banning donations from organizations and unions was a good move, and I applaud that action.

In addition to the current problem of declining voter turnout in Canada, we have a new problem, one that has just emerged, and that is the possibility of fraudulent voter suppression. This is a huge problem. We can see parties ignoring voters, sometimes trying to discourage them with ugly pictures or harsh words, but fraudulent suppression is a much bigger problem. This is something new that has washed up on the beach of Canada and we need to give the Chief Electoral Officer sufficient powers to deal with it.

Included in the allegations that are being widely investigated by Elections Canada is the issue of robocalls and live calls telling voters that their polling districts have moved or that the hours have changed. I have had reports of both of these kinds of calls in my riding of Burnaby—Douglas. One voter wrote me an email and said that he had received a robocall telling him that the hours had changed at his polling station. I was knocking on doors last Saturday and another voter told me that he received a call saying his election station had moved when it clearly had not. These two voters were smart enough to disregard these robocalls and go on their merry way to exercise their democratic right.

These are serious allegations and they really need to be investigated to the deepest possible extent. That is why the Chief Electoral Officer needs new powers and the tools to do the job necessary to get to the bottom of this. The investigative capabilities need to be strengthened to give the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request all necessary documents from political parties to ensure compliance with the Canada Elections Acts.

• (1510)

Thousands of dollars were spent on the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform. The documents make a great Friday night read for anybody in the House and they are worth going through. A panel of experts said that we were risking a serious democratic decline in Canada and that giving more power to the Chief Electoral Officer of

Canada would be one of the key things that would make our democracy more secure.

Millions of dollars are spent on sending soldiers abroad, on sending election observers abroad to monitor elections in other countries to bring democracy to those countries. I do not see how we can do that with a straight face if our own Canadian democracy is facing one of the biggest scandals, if substantiated, that we have ever had in Canadian history.

That is the trick here. The Chief Electoral Officer needs the power to get a handle on this so he can assure Canadians that things are either okay and this is some kind of mistake, or that there is a real problem that needs to be investigated and either substantiated or disproved. We could then amend the Elections Act to stop this kind of thing from happening.

These are not the only problems with our democratic system in Canada. Not only do we have declining voter turnout in elections, but citizen participation between elections is also declining. They are often closely related.

I am proud to say that I recently brought forward a motion that, if passed, will change the petitioning process in the House. Currently, we only have a paper-based petition system. I am proposing that the House move to e-petitions. I hope my motion will be adopted. If so, this will allow citizens to become more engaged between elections. It will bring those people into the process who would not normally be brought into it. Under this proposition, citizens will be able to submit signed petitions online. The Conservative government in the United Kingdom passed a law that if a petition received over 50,000 signatures, that issue would be debated in the House of Commons. It would be debated outside of regular business hours to ensure it would not interfere with the regular business of the House. This gives citizens direct access to the democratic process. Its time has come in Canada.

We have had all these problems with robofraud and calls that should not exist and all the questions around that matter. Then we are back and forth on whether to give the Chief Electoral Officer investigative powers. We need to bring forward something positive and proactive to encourage citizens to participate in their governance in their communities. The e-petitions idea is something that we should pursue.

The opposition day motion proposes that Elections Canada investigation capabilities be strengthened to include giving the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request all necessary documents from political parties to ensure compliance with the Canada Elections Act.

We are also proposing that telecommunication companies that provide voter contact services during a general election must register with Elections Canada. That is such a great idea. It is something I have been studying my whole life. I am very excited that this may happen in Canada.

Business of Supply

Our third proposal is that all clients of telecommunication companies during a general election must have their identity registered and verified. Technology has moved on. It used to be door knocking, sending letters around to folks, gatherings, getting people out to vote. We now have massive constituencies and millions of Canadians to communicate with so of course we are going to use telecommunications. In the 21st century we need a 21st century Canada Elections Act to cover this new technology to ensure it is working to the benefit of voters, not to their detriment.

• (1515)

This motion is extremely important. Yesterday I was of the opinion from what the Prime Minister said that it would have support, but today it is looking a little different. We will have to wait and see what happens when we vote on the motion. This motion is something I wholeheartedly support.

The robo fraud problem is grabbing the headlines. Once it is investigated and people are either sent to jail or fined, it will go away, but it will pop up again. In order to protect our democratic system, the most important thing to do would be to ensure that the independent officers who oversee our election processes are given the powers they need to get the job done.

• (1520)

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to correct a couple of things that the member said, because I know he would want to be absolutely correct in what he is saying.

He alleged that the voter turnout numbers were down in the last election. That is not correct. I would encourage him to check the numbers. In fact, some 900,000 more Canadians voted. I would like to think that is because our party introduced additional advance polling days and many Canadians took advantage of them. We are very proud of that. We think that providing greater opportunity for Canadians to exercise their democratic right was the right thing to do. We are proud to have done that.

In addition, the member is arguing for additional investigative powers for Elections Canada. We have indicated we have no problem with the motion. I do not know if the NDP is aware that the investigative authority of Elections Canada is quite broad. The former chief electoral officer, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, and the current Chief Electoral Officer have both been clear in indicating that they have all the investigative authority and ability they require.

I do have a specific question for the NDP. It relates to transparency. Why is it that our party provides transparent reports and gives a full breakdown of where we have spent money, but the NDP seems to rely on a single category called “miscellaneous”? Why is it not providing the same kind of transparency that other parties are providing to Elections Canada?

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, there are a few corrections I can make. The number I was quoting earlier was a percentage. The Elections Canada website tracks the percentage of voters who turn out during elections. In the 1980s, there was an 80% turnout. That is on the Elections Canada website. In the last election there was a 61% turnout. That is a 20 percentage point drop. In any other industry

anywhere in Canada, if there was this kind of drop, there would be massive investigations to see why it was happening.

We get raw figures, and of course they will go up because the population goes up. That is just smoke to cover up what is going on here. It is extremely disappointing. The member should be more forthright with what he is saying and use percentages rather than raw figures. It is disingenuous.

I do know what I am talking about. I have been asked to testify in front of a number of commissions on electoral reform. I was an academic adviser to the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in B.C. I know what I am talking about. That side does not.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it has taken almost a year for Elections Canada to get to this point in its investigation with respect to what happened in Guelph, and now in Nipissing—Timiskaming and Kingston. I am curious if the member thinks that maybe it has taken so long because of the lack of authority and power that Elections Canada has. It has to try and dig up all sorts of evidence from whatever sources it can and then it has to go before a judge to try and convince a judge whether it has the right authority, for instance, to look at the records of RackNine.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, of course one of the main problems with investigating elections is under-resourcing. That is not a direct answer to the question, but it is something we should critically look at. We should ensure that these offices will not get their budgets cut because that would further impede their ability to investigate.

Also, it is clear that when the Chief Electoral Officer submits a report saying that he or she needs new powers to do his or her job, they should be granted. There is nothing more important in Canada than to make sure our democratic foundations are secure. They have been rattled and shaken. I knocked on probably 200 doors on Saturday in normally quiet neighbourhoods. That is what was on the lips of the people I talked to.

We have to get to the bottom of this. We have to ensure that the Chief Electoral Officer has the power to investigate these things in the future.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to join the debate on the motion brought forward by the NDP member for Hamilton Centre.

I would like to begin by stating that as the government that brought in the Federal Accountability Act bringing lasting and significant change to address accountability in government, we are not opposed at all to this motion. Our government fully supports transparency and accountability. It is for this reason that we in the Conservative Party have been open in making all of our records available to Elections Canada officials as they get to the bottom of allegations made in Guelph. Such actions as were alleged in Guelph are unacceptable and we will continue to do all we can to assist Elections Canada investigators.

Business of Supply

However, the opposition parties are using this motion to yet again continue their baseless smear campaign with more unsubstantiated attacks in the House of Commons as well as in the media. Over the course of the debate today, they have made, and I am sure they will continue to make, more false allegations and launch more smears against Conservative MPs and candidates, and what is worse, the volunteers and supporters of our great party. It continues to be clear that those members do not have any information on which to base their attacks. Indeed, it is hearsay.

I would like to use my time today to speak about government action that brings true accountability and not to continue a baseless smear campaign for political advantage.

When I speak of accountability, our government is one of accountability. In 2006 when we first came to power, it was on a promise to bring back accountability to the way government works. That is exactly what we have done.

One of the first major pieces of legislation that our government brought forward was the Federal Accountability Act. In fact, I know Bill C-2 was the first bill brought forward by our government in 2006. The act, and its action plan, was one of the most comprehensive initiatives ever undertaken to address accountability in government and it has made lasting and significant changes to the way government works.

We strengthened and streamlined how government works in our country while making it more effective and more accountable to Canadian voters. Our actions helped to earn back the trust of Canadians in their government institutions. The Federal Accountability Act amended 46 existing statutes and created two new ones. Some of these changes came into force at royal assent on December 12, 2006, while others were subject to coming into force dates set out in the act or established by order in council.

The introduction of Bill C-2 was accompanied by the federal accountability action plan which organized the various elements of the Federal Accountability Act along 14 themes. As well, it set out related policy initiatives. We reformed the financing of political parties along with donation limits. We banned secret political donations, although the NDP has since elected to take some of those, it appears. We strengthened the role of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner and the Auditor General. We toughened the Lobbyists Registration Act and cleaned up government polling and advertising. We strengthened access to information legislation bringing crown corporations under the access to information legislation, as well as auditing and accountability within departments.

The record very clearly shows our Conservative government does not just believe in open government, we in fact have provided open, transparent and accountable government for each and every Canadian. Ours indeed is a government of accountability.

With respect to the current situation, since Elections Canada began looking into reports from the media and other sources about a specific case in the riding of Guelph, our government and the Conservative Party of Canada have been open and transparent with all of our records, making them available to Elections Canada so as to assist in its investigation. The Conservative Party did not organize

or know about any such activities in the riding, but the opposition continues to launch baseless smear campaigns against our party. If the opposition members truly wanted to support Elections Canada and its work in this specific case, they would do as we have done and provide all of their records related to calls they made during the last election: absolute transparency.

Both parties opposite spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands phone calls during the last election, and they have thus far refused to disclose these details to Elections Canada officials. Why is this not their top priority instead of continuing their baseless smear campaign? Canadians need to ask themselves that very essential question. If any untoward behaviour is uncovered, the Conservative Party of Canada demands that all those responsible be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

● (1525)

As for the motion before the House today, to have the government table legislative amendments which would strengthen the powers of the Chief Electoral Officer in the wake of these exaggerated allegations, I am not opposed. However, it must be said that the Conservative Party of Canada has provided all of our information to Elections Canada to assist it so we can get to the bottom of what has happened in the investigation going on in Guelph. We do this willingly. There is currently nothing preventing the NDP or Liberal Party from giving over their own information willingly to Elections Canada officials. As the Prime Minister has stated, we have been very clear about the Conservative Party of Canada's activities. All the calls made by the Conservative Party are documented. All of those records are available to Elections Canada. We will be looking forward with great interest to see what documents exist on the NDP's and Liberal Party's telephone activities during the campaign.

The Conservative Party of Canada ran a clean and ethical campaign and would never tolerate such activities as have been alleged by the parties opposite. The Conservative Party was not involved with these fake calls in Guelph. If anyone on a local campaign was involved, he or she will not play a role in a future campaign. Voter suppression is extremely serious and if anything improper occurred, those responsible should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. The job of a political party, and indeed our job as politicians, in a campaign is to get voters out to the polls. We do not engage in voter suppression.

However, the exaggerated allegations and baseless smear campaign which the opposition parties continue to press demean the millions of voters who cast legitimate votes in the last election. The opposition paid millions of dollars to make hundreds of thousands of phone calls during the last campaign. Before they continue with these baseless smears, opposition members should prove their own callers were not behind these reports.

Business of Supply

The motion before the House lays out three points: Elections Canada investigation capabilities be strengthened, to include giving the Chief Electoral Officer the power to request all necessary documents from political parties to ensure compliance with the Elections Act; all telecommunication companies that provide voter contact services during a general election must register with Elections Canada; and all clients of telecommunication companies during a general election have their identity registered and verified. The Conservative Party is thus far the only party that has documented all calls during the campaign and made all of those records available to Elections Canada. Why are we the only ones who have done this? Yet the opposition members continue to run a baseless smear campaign against our government, launching false allegations against dozens of Conservative MPs and candidates.

I would like to take a few moments to address some of the facts in the opposition's allegations.

After weeks of unsubstantiated attacks in this place and in the media, it is clear that it has no information to back up its claims in this smear campaign. Canadians rejected this type of mud slinging in the last election.

In the case of the electoral district of Guelph, as has been stated previously, the Conservative Party of Canada has made available to Elections Canada all information in regard to our calls made during the campaign. It is obvious that the Conservative Party was not involved with the alleged calls in that riding. If something improper did occur, we expect that those responsible will be fully held to account.

The NDP and the Liberal Party have made a number of new allegations about similar deliberately misleading calls made in other ridings during the last election, in which we, the Conservative Party of Canada, categorically deny any involvement. However, when the interim Leader of the Opposition was asked eight times for evidence on CBC's *Power and Politics*, she was unable to provide any evidence at all. We have heard that from the member for Timmins—James Bay. We have heard it from the interim leader of the Liberal Party. They have no evidence. They are simply throwing out baseless allegations.

The NDP claim that South Shore—St. Margaret's received fraudulent calls. However, the NDP riding association president, Wolfgang Ziemer said it is not true. He said, "There's just no way that I can add any fuel to this fire, if there is a fire. I have no idea how the riding got on" the list.

The Liberals claim that Wellington—Halton Hills received fraudulent calls, but the Liberal candidate said it is not true. "Barry Peters said he doesn't recall hearing about any suspicious calls either while out door-knocking nor back at the office". That was reported on *Global News* on Thursday, March 1.

● (1530)

The Liberals have claimed that in some ridings Liberal supporters received calls at inconvenient times that could be described as harassing from people who identified themselves as calling from the Liberal Party of Canada. However, the Liberal Party paid millions of dollars to make these calls and hired firms to say these exact scripts

to Canadians, but the Liberals have not yet released the scripts, nor have they provided their call records. We have to ask why.

In the Liberal campaign in Haldimand—Norfolk, Bob Speller complained that harassing calls were being made on his behalf late at night, but his campaign paid First Contact \$4,062 to make calls. The Liberal candidate in Niagara Falls, Bev Hodgson, has complained that harassing calls were made on her behalf at night. Her campaign paid First Contact \$11,300. The same goes for the Sydney—Victoria Liberal candidate, Mark Eyking. His campaign paid First Contact \$11,753.

There is a pattern here: First Contact, First Contact, First Contact.

The Liberals have claimed these calls originated in the U.S., but the Liberal Party is the party that sourced its voter phone calls from the U.S. during the last election. A CBC investigation conducted during the campaign traced some of these calls, the calls that the Liberals have been complaining about, back to Liberal-affiliated call centres. The CBC traced these calls back to Liberal-affiliated call centres.

Let us not forget that this is the same Liberal Party that recently revealed that one of its own backroom operatives, Adam Carroll, was behind a dirty, sleazy, underhanded campaign of vicious, anonymous smears against the Minister of Public Safety. Yet this is just the latest in a long history of shady Liberal practices that indeed harm our democracy.

During the 2011 election, Liberals were caught and charged for stealing opponents' election signs, a violation of the Elections Act. Also during the 2011 election, Joe Volpe and a campaign worker were caught taking Green Party literature directly from people's mailboxes. It is ironic that Mr. Carroll, as I mentioned earlier, the one who committed the dirty, sleazy, underhanded attack campaign against the Minister of Public Safety, also happened to work on Mr. Volpe's campaign.

In 2004 the Liberal Party had callers running a push-poll, and you might remember this, Mr. Speaker, asking about how people felt about the Conservatives being taken over by right-wing Christians. It was outrageous. Actions like this even made Liberals like the current member for Scarborough—Guildwood condemn their party's activities.

We must not forget the sponsorship scandal where Liberals admitted taking envelopes filled with cash, which were never reported, and giving them to so-called orphan ridings to fund their campaigns.

It is up to these same Liberals to prove that these are not Liberal calls before they continue making their extreme, baseless allegations and undertake yet another vicious anonymous smear campaign against dozens of decent, upstanding Conservative MPs and candidates from the last election.

Business of Supply

In conclusion, dirty tricks such as these led to the fall of the Liberal Party and to a clear call for more accountable governments. Here, our Conservative government was elected on a platform of accountability, and with the Federal Accountability Act we helped to earn back the trust of Canadians in their government institutions.

While I do not oppose the motion brought forward by the hon. member for Hamilton Centre, I strongly oppose and reject the baseless allegations and unsubstantiated smear campaign by the parties opposite.

Our government and the Conservative Party of Canada have been nothing but open and transparent with Elections Canada about all the calls made during the last election. On their part, the Liberals and NDP, as I have said many times in this House, spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands, and millions, I would argue, of phone calls during the last election. If the opposition truly wants to support Elections Canada, they should provide all of their records relating to the calls they made during the last election, just as the Conservative Party of Canada already has.

It is interesting that this debate has been brought to the floor of the House of Commons today. Of course, we know what the motivations of the member are in doing so, to further propagate the baseless, unsubstantiated smear campaign that we have seen in this House for some days. However, Canadians are not fooled by this. I have received messages from people from coast to coast to coast, from campaign volunteers, everyday people who got out and voted, people who are asking why the House of Commons is not concerned about their priorities. They want to know what is going on with the House of Commons.

• (1535)

It is clear that voter participation was not suppressed in the last election. The member who spoke previously was not fulsome in his answer in suggesting that he was talking about percentages while I was talking about numbers in absolute terms. He knows very well that the percentage of voters between the 2008 campaign and the 2011 campaign went up, not down. He knows that full well. He is just not providing that information to the House, and that is too bad.

We saw voter participation increase in virtually every riding in the country. That is wonderful, a great statement that we have in fact turned around a bit of a trend. We have turned it around, and how did we do it? We did it by providing more, not less, days to vote. We turned it around by encouraging each and every Canadian voter to get out and vote.

The Conservative Party did what other parties do. We contacted Conservative Party supporters and encouraged them to get to the polls. We won a strong, stable, national Conservative majority government and are proud of that. Based on that strong, stable, Conservative majority government, Conservatives are undertaking the priorities of Canadians by protecting the economy and providing more hope and opportunity for Canadians. We are focusing on the priorities of each and every Canadian, including protecting victims by bringing in new crime legislation.

Conservatives are also doing more than that. We are moving against past egregious acts, like the long gun registry. Other members have mentioned Nipissing—Timiskaming. I think the

voters in Nipissing—Timiskaming spoke out loud and clear in the last election when it came to the long gun registry. We cannot forget about that.

We also cannot ignore the fact that the Liberal Party wants people to forget about what it ran on in the last election. That is why it is launching this baseless, unsubstantiated smear campaign. It ran a campaign of higher taxes and wasteful spending. At a time when Canadians are concerned about that, when they see foreign countries undergoing difficulties as a result of wasteful spending, that is what the Liberal Party ran on. That is why voters did not vote Liberal.

We see a collection of failed Liberal candidates coming forward, stepping up and suggesting that something untoward happened and that this is the only possible way they could have lost the election. However, in virtually all of these ridings, certainly all of the ones I have seen mentioned, voter participation was up. More people voted, not less.

More of those people voted Conservative, because they saw us as the only party fit to guide this country through this difficult global economic time. They put their faith in the Prime Minister of this country. They put their faith in the Minister of Finance of this country. They put their faith in Conservative candidates from coast to coast to coast. They put their faith in those volunteers who were doing the hard work of knocking on doors. They put their faith in each and every person who came up them, friends and family, and said they were going to vote Conservative.

That is how Conservatives won the last election. We won it with hard work. We won it with dedication. We won it with a vision and a plan, an aspiration to make Canada even greater than it ever has been, because we believe Canada's best days are ahead.

As I have said, Conservatives have no problem providing additional authorities and supporting this motion that is before the House, but let us also be clear: ours is the party that is providing transparency, ours is the party that has brought accountability to Canadians, ours is the party that believes in open government, and ours is the party that is delivering on the promise that we made to Canadians. We can never forget that.

• (1540)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the argument presented by my colleague from Peterborough is nothing new. We have been hearing it for three days in question period. It goes like this: a shop is burgled, an individual is arrested and charged, and the person charged claims that he cannot be charged because first of all the owner of the shop has to prove his own innocence. This makes no sense. It is a totally fallacious argument.

Business of Supply

I have a more specific question to ask the hon. member for Peterborough. He speaks of data that have been provided to Elections Canada. Certain things might be provided to Elections Canada that are not currently being provided. I am speaking in particular of the scripts that were used by the telemarketing firms in the employ of the Conservative Party. The question was put to the hon. member during a media panel, but I heard no satisfactory response. I would like to hear that response.

Does Elections Canada at present have the power to obtain those scripts? Has the Conservative Party provided them? If the Conservative Party has not provided them and Elections Canada does not have this power, is the motion moved today not relevant because it would give Elections Canada the capability to obtain this type of documentation?

• (1545)

[English]

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, Elections Canada has informed the Conservative Party that it is undertaking a single investigation, and that is in the riding of Guelph. We have been very clear from the get-go that we will fully assist them in any regard.

Members do not have to take my word for it. They can look at what the former Chief Electoral Officer, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, and the current Chief Electoral Officer, Marc Mayrand, have said on this very matter. They have indicated that when they undertake an investigation, they do have all the investigative ability and authority required. They can bring in additional services and support from the RCMP should they need it.

We encourage them to do that because, ultimately, what all Canadians want is to have elections fought fairly and for anyone who undertakes anything untoward to be held fully accountable. Ours is the party that believes in justice. That is what we want in every aspect of Canadian society. We certainly want to see that in elections.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it would take most of my allotted time to respond to all of the outrageous allegations made in the member's speech, but I will say that the Conservative Party of Canada is the only party in Canada that has been charged and plead guilty and paid a fine for the in and out scandal and violating the Elections Act. It is the only one.

However, I would like the member to stand and look into the camera and say the following to the over 31,000 Canadians who have already written to Elections Canada, to Peggy Walsh Craig in Nipissing—Timiskaming, to Raymond Young in Sydney—Victoria, to Danny Boyle and veteran Donald Miller in Guelph, and to Eduardo Harari in York Centre, that they are just part of a smear campaign, that this never happened to them and that they were not misdirected at all.

I dare you to stand and speak to Canadians and tell them they are just part of a smear campaign.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I am presuming that the hon. member for Guelph is not asking me to look into the camera, but rather the hon. parliamentary secretary.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: Here I am, Mr. Speaker, standing in my place and accepting the dare, not afraid. I am never afraid to stand up for what is true. I will not be intimidated.

I am not a person who made a determination, as the member opposite did, to join a party that stole some \$363 million from Canadians in the sponsorship scandal, \$43 million of which is still missing.

The member talked about the administrative discrepancy that we had with Elections Canada. That has all been set aside and has worked its way through. However, Elections Canada never undertook a single investigation of the Liberal Party. When members talk about convictions I would like to know, and maybe the member can indicate, which Liberal ridings accepted the stolen money in the sponsorship scandal, because Canadians would like to know that. Why did Liberal members never go to jail for it? They should have gone to jail.

I would like to know why the member decided it was appropriate to join a party that stole money from Canadians. It could have gone to health care, to long-term care, to all—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Questions and comments, the hon. member for Prince Edward—Hastings.

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if I may direct these comments not just to the opposition but to the entire House, quite frankly, we are only as good as our name and our reputation. We are all taking a beating when this kind of slander and activity takes place in the House. If there is a particular crime, someone should wear the mantle for that. At some point that will happen through the legalities of the law and the examination by Elections Canada of whoever is responsible for this.

I would suggest to hon. members this kind of accusation and innuendo based entirely on hyperbole, not accurate information, does the entire House a disservice. It destroys the credibility of the nation and of the people who respected us to come here to do a job for them. I find it absolutely disgusting that we carry on this way.

My question is for the parliamentary secretary. I agree that we do need to get to the bottom of this. The Conservative Party is willing to put forward the information it has. In his opinion, why will the opposition parties not simply produce their lists and information so that we can deal with this in an honest, open and transparent manner?

• (1550)

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated earlier, I believe that when they do provide that information to Elections Canada it will actually be found that the Liberals have in fact made these calls themselves.

I hear the Liberal Party member asking why they would want to suppress their own vote. If the Liberals did not want to suppress their own vote they never would have run on the platform they did in the last election. It was a campaign based on wasteful spending, higher taxes and not even remotely related to the priorities of Canadians. That is what the Liberals ran on.

Business of Supply

If there is one thing that has hurt this nation, that has shook it to its core, more than anything in my lifetime, it was the Liberal sponsorship scandal that caused Canadians from coast to coast to coast to question their government and question officials. It was an egregious crime and Liberal MPs probably should have gone to jail. I would like to know why they did not.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary was almost moving when he spoke to us of the Conservative volunteers. We have volunteers in my constituency. The people who work the phones are there for the entire duration of the campaign, and sometimes they get paid in pizza. What is increasingly evident with the Conservatives is that it is not volunteers we are talking about. The unscrupulous tactics that were used were used by RMG and RackNine. Those companies are paid; they are not volunteers. There is a direct connection to the Conservative Party. The parliamentary secretary made a link to the sponsorship scandal. When he was in opposition, he was most vocal in calling for a public inquiry into the sponsorship scandal.

What happened with the Liberals was successfully brought to light, but why does he not want to shed light today on what happened with the Conservatives by conducting a public inquiry and providing more powers to Elections Canada?

[English]

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: Mr. Speaker, as I said, the past and current Chief Electoral Officers have both been very clear in indicating that they have the investigative ability and authority to look into this matter and these allegations. We put our faith in them, and we do believe that when the truth comes out the Conservative Party of Canada will be vindicated.

What is not clear is whether the opposition parties, after all the mudslinging and unsubstantiated smear campaign that they have undertaken, will apologize to the good members of the House. Hon. members in this House have had their names smeared by the parties opposite. I think it is absolutely reprehensible what they have done. I would hope that at some point, when the truth comes out, they will stand in place and apologize to the good members of the House, the hon. members who did not deserve this kind of smear campaign.

[Translation]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary should listen to his colleague and stop smearing the opposition. When you slip on a banana peel, you have to admit to getting dirty. Canadians want the whole truth. They want this government to provide all the documentation necessary for a fair and equitable investigation. The most equitable way to do that is to seek the truth, not to accuse the hon. members opposite and sweep the whole thing under the rug. The Conservatives have to face up to their responsibilities.

[English]

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: Mr. Speaker, I agree that when one slips on a banana peel one is dirty. The NDP slipped on a banana peel when it tried to illegally direct money into the Broadbent Institute just this past fall. It had to return cheques as a result of Elections Canada looking into the matter. Very clearly, it knew it was making infractions against the Canada Elections Act.

Members of the NDP also robo-dialed a Quebec member's riding some months ago without identifying themselves, which is against the law according to the CRTC. They might want to look into that. They also have robo-dialed my riding and the ridings of other Conservative members very recently making phoney allegations about the intent of legislation. These efforts are ongoing on the part of the NDP members. They are not lily white. In fact, we stand accused by parties that undertake the exact actions that they pretend to dislike.

[Translation]

Ms. Charmaine Borg (Terrebonne—Blainville, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform the House that I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Compton—Stanstead.

I am pleased to have an opportunity to rise today to share my thoughts on an important issue that goes to the heart of the legitimacy of this House, democracy.

Old habits seem to die hard with the Conservatives. One year later, almost to the day, another scandal on electoral fraud has broken out. I am starting to have serious misgivings about the democracy in which we live.

It discourages me when I see the extent to which this electoral fraud seems to be par for the course for this government. Over recent years, this government has tried an increasing number of strategies that push the limits as to what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in Canadian politics. The government was found guilty only last year of electoral fraud during the 2005–2006 election. This five year dispute, categorized as “administrative” by the Prime Minister himself, smacks of growing contempt by this government towards Canada's democratic institutions.

This perception has been reinforced by the behaviour of this Prime Minister during last year's debacle. As reported by numerous university professors, who were signatories to an op-ed published in *La Presse* on April 25 of last year, and I quote:

His most virulent attacks were reserved for the judges that he described more than once as “activists” who meddle in politics. In saying this, it is in fact he [the Prime Minister] who was politicizing the administration of justice. This is a dangerous and slippery slope at the bottom of which it is not judges who have the most to lose. [...] When the time has come that judges have to fear the criticism, and even the reprisals of political leaders, the rights of everyday citizens will hold hardly more weight than those of the state. Never before have our leaders dared to venture in this direction.

A press review by Manon Cornellier published in *Le Devoir* on March 3 demonstrates the furor with which Canadians are reacting to this new scandal.

Canadians are fed up, frustrated and indignant. Their confidence in the electoral system has been even further shaken. Who can blame them when increasingly scandalous revelations are being systematically disclosed? How can the government accuse the opposition parties, which are representing the real concerns of Canadians, of orchestrating a smear campaign, when we are aware of the dubious tactics employed by this government?

The general indignation felt by Canadians in all regions of this country shows the extent to which Canadians are becoming increasingly cynical about politics and about our government. I am particularly concerned by the serious consequences that this growing feeling will have for our future generations.

Business of Supply

I am pleased to be one of the 20 or so young members of this House, because I hope that our involvement in politics will restore hope to Canadian youth. We have to let them see our commitment, and above all our integrity.

How is that possible when this government continues to act so inconsistently? It abolishes the firearms registry. It changes the census rules, citing the violation of people's privacy, among other things, but has no hesitation about introducing a bill that is potentially dangerous to individual rights and freedoms: Bill C-30. It is completely baffling.

We must acknowledge, at all costs, that this scandal shows us that the electoral landscape is no longer the same in Canada. The age of innocence, of trust, has unfortunately come to an end. Canadians are witnessing a scandal that shows just how much some people will play with the electoral system in order to prevent people from participating in an institution that is fundamental to our rights and freedoms. This is serious, it is sad, it is disappointing and it is deplorable.

In Canada, there used to be good faith, over and above our political differences. We all agreed that respect for democracy and freedom of expression was fundamental. Clearly, that is no longer the case. The election fraud scandal shows us that there are players who will not hesitate to subvert the system in order to give voters false information and harass them.

This is not just an issue of robocalls. It would have been the same scandal if the method used had been an email or a letter. It is election fraud, which is deplorable, and the use of communication methods to misinform voters and affect their participation.

The NDP is proposing something very important in today's motion. The NDP is proposing that we take strong action to find the guilty parties and restore Canadians' confidence in the electoral system.

• (1555)

This is a bold motion whose only purpose is to give the Chief Electoral Officer additional powers so he can get to the bottom of this scandal. Canadians all across the country would think that a motion like this is essential. I am pleased to learn that the government is going to support it. However, this government has proved that it is afraid of the outcome of an investigation, afraid to discover who is responsible for the election fraud that insulted so many Canadians. Why such cowardice on the government's part?

Losing the confidence of the electorate is the real issue here, because losing the confidence of the electorate means losing one's own legitimacy in this House. If the people view their own electoral system—the pillar of the democratic foundation of this country—with cynicism, and observers are worried about respect for the independence of the judicial system, how can we allow machinations like these to be repeated? It is the responsibility of the government to prevent scandals like this from taking place. This is one more example in a long list of cases of mismanagement of public funds.

I thought of my constituents as I rose today. They are the ones who are the biggest victims in all this. This is an affront to the fundamental rights of people to participate, express themselves and organize in a democratic and participatory community. Thanks to

their right to vote, the people of Terrebonne, Blainville and Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines, just like the people of Guelph, Nipissing-Timiskaming and elsewhere, have the chance to directly influence federal politics just once every three or four years. It is a very important time for them, because an election makes them think about their collective future, their dreams and their values. Those thoughts, that discussion, that participation are sacred. Voting means having the right to think and express oneself. The five-week election campaign is when the greatest number of people get involved.

My constituents are very concerned and rightfully so. What are they going to think about the quality of our democracy from now on? How can I tell them with confidence that their fundamental right to democratic expression will be respected in future?

I want to point out that in Terrebonne, Blainville and Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines there are a number of veterans who risked their lives to give us this sacred right. There are women—and today is International Women's Day—who fought for the right to vote. In this House, unfortunately, we are in process of debating whether that right to vote was violated. I find that unbelievably sad. People were outraged when Maurice Duplessis had dead people voting for him. I wonder which is worse: doing that or preventing the living from voting.

• (1600)

[English]

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a previous speaker, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, said that this was exclusive to Guelph and yet we know there were calls to constituents of Nipissing—Timiskaming, Kingston and the Islands, Saanich—Gulf Islands and Windsor—Tecumseh, all of the same nature. They were calls to identify voters as not supporting the Conservatives and then being followed up with a call on election day to tell people to go elsewhere than their regular poll.

Does the member think that could possibly be the concoction of one rogue person or was it a collaborative effort? Would it have required connections to the only party that would have that kind of voter identification system?

[Translation]

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Guelph for his question. Thirty-one thousand people called Elections Canada. This is not a matter of just one constituency in particular. Those 31,000 calls could not all have come from Guelph or Nipissing; they came from all over. That is why this motion has been moved today. Elections Canada needs more powers to investigate this matter. We must give it those powers. I am pleased to see that the Conservatives will support this motion because we need to get to the bottom of this.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my hon. colleague and thank her for her outstanding, comprehensive and extremely heartfelt speech. She aptly explains for us how these sorts of fraudulent and dubious tactics kill voter interest. In the end, this is a strategy that casts doubt on the very legitimacy of the members who are part of the government, since it is they who represent the voters. If the voters' right to vote has not been respected, all of this is cast into question.

Business of Supply

There is talk of engaging young people in the discussions so they can make their opinions known. How indeed can the involvement of young people be restored with this sort of enterprise?

• (1605)

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question.

I will tell you what must not be done: conduct a campaign of election fraud. That is the main thing not to do. If we want to inspire our youth and inspire our own generation and future generations to get involved in politics, we have to show them that their right to vote will be respected in future. To me, that is paramount. If we want to encourage public consultations and discussions, it starts with the right to vote. I would like to thank my colleague. I think that what we have here is a perfect example of what not to do.

Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Terrebonne—Blainville has just spoken the words “election fraud”. If we had no proof that the party opposite is in the process of conducting a smear campaign, we have it now. Nothing has in fact been proven. The Elections Canada investigations have not been completed and she is already talking election fraud.

Her predecessor, another opposition member, lamented the voter turnout rate in Canada compared with the rate in the 1950s. Happily, the turnout rate was up in the last election. Does the hon. member not agree that to talk about election fraud at this time, with no evidence and no proof, would tend to discourage voters in a completely gratuitous and unnecessary way, and that she is complicit in this unjustified and truly deplorable smear campaign?

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, we saw an instance of election fraud just last year. It is not unusual to talk about it. It was in fact proven, and the Conservatives even pleaded guilty to the charge.

This is not the first time that election fraud has been raised in the House. Thirty-one thousand calls represent a real campaign. Is he saying that 31,000 Canadians are involved in a smear campaign? I think that those Canadians, who were denied the right to vote because they were misinformed as to the site of their polling station, will be insulted that the hon. colleague opposite is saying they are part of a smear campaign. I think they will be truly insulted.

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague from Terrebonne—Blainville on her excellent speech. There will be many more fine speeches from my colleagues over the next few minutes. This being International Women's Day, I would like to express my great pride in working alongside such great women. Every day we see the quality of the NDP caucus improving because of these women. First of all, I would like to wish every woman on the planet, regardless of her political allegiance, race or religion, a day that is filled with happiness, joy and smiles, and I hope there will be many other days like this one in the future.

Today, we are debating a motion that concerns respect for democratic rights and freedoms, which are extremely important in a country like ours, a civilized, industrialized country that has always been a leader in terms of democratic rights, and one that has even helped a lot of countries in the world make sure that their rights were respected. The right to vote for one party or another must be

exercised in a free and enlightened way. It is a right that, in most democratic countries, is recognized in the constitution. In this country, it is recognized in particular in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

But throughout the course of human history and in today's society, many women have been victims of injustice and their rights have been violated. As I said earlier with great sadness, many people, and not just women, have died because they tried to vote or because they stood for election. This is very important today. Discussing this issue today, in 2012, is extremely important and it goes far beyond the scandal that we are dealing with these days. Yes, fraud is suspected. Let us call it a scandal.

Although the motion put forward by the hon. member for Hamilton Centre focuses primarily on strengthening integrity in our democracy, it has become necessary because of the alleged electoral fraud that went on behind the scenes during the last election campaign. What happened, exactly? First of all, there were the robocalls on election day or a few days before by people claiming to work for Elections Canada and giving out incorrect information about the location of polling stations. Then, calls were made to ask the voters who they were planning to vote for, and if the voters answered that they would not be voting for the Conservative Party, they received another call sometime over the next few days from someone who claimed this time to be working for Elections Canada and who provided totally misleading information about the location of the polling station. Finally, and this is what is most disturbing, supporters of other parties received harassing calls made by people claiming to be working for the party these people supported, the Liberal Party in this case. They were sworn at over the telephone at two o'clock, three o'clock or six o'clock in the morning. This is unacceptable in a civilized society like ours.

RackNine, a company that provides automated calling services and is often used by the Conservative Party, is one of the companies involved. The ties between RackNine and the Conservative Party are very strong. RMG is a company that works in voter contact, database management and fundraising for the Conservative Party and several other right-leaning groups, among others. The former Conservative campaign manager, Tom Flanagan, even attributed the Conservatives' 2006 election win to RMG.

What rules were broken? Provisions of the Canada Elections Act, including paragraph 281(g), which states:

281. No person shall, inside or outside Canada,

(g) wilfully prevent or endeavour to prevent an elector from voting at an election;

Paragraph 482 (b) states:

482. Every person is guilty of an offence who

(b) by any pretence or contrivance, including by representing that the ballot or the manner of voting at an election is not secret, induces a person to vote or refrain from voting or to vote or refrain from voting for a particular candidate at an election.

Business of Supply

•(1610)

The Chief Electoral Officer even submitted a series of recommendations to the Speaker of the House of Commons on legislative reforms after the 40th general election. Among other things, he asked for the power to order that political parties provide any documents or information that may be necessary to verify compliance with the requirements of the act with respect to election expenses returns. At present only local campaigns must file documentary evidence to support their election expenses returns. In his request, the Chief Electoral Officer indicated that his provincial counterparts have this authority, and he also pointed out that political parties receive public funds based on their election expenses returns. It is very troubling to read such things.

What is the crux of the matter? It is about ethics and morals. The government has much to learn in that regard. It is disappointing that the government does not respect the will of 61% of the voters, who did not vote for the Conservative Party, its ideology and its complete lack of integrity.

I too have the feeling that in front of me is a party that totally rejects the results of the last election and that is doing and will do everything in its power—granted by only 39% of the voters—to make sure it never happens again. It is as if we were seeing the beginning of a dictatorship. It is as if this government wanted to put everything in place to make sure that people vote for it and that people comply with what the party dictates. Nevertheless, the current Prime Minister ran his election campaign on the importance of accountability for members of political parties, integrity and respect for the vote.

What point has the Prime Minister reached on this issue? He has reached a dead end. There has been no concrete action by the Prime Minister on the extremely important matter of making the voters more confident in our political system. Yes, he is the leader of his party, but he is also the Prime Minister of all Canadians. It is the Prime Minister's duty to uphold the integrity of the electoral process and the democratic system, to ensure that members of Parliament are accountable and that people's votes are respected. They are free to vote for anyone they want, and this freedom is guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

At present, the current government is doing nothing but throw the accusations back at the other parties. It is refusing to deal with the situation and is putting the blame squarely on others. We have seen the party in power follow a strategy aimed at distracting and confusing people ever since accusations were made against this government, which is totally disrespectful of the democratic values that are so dear to Canadians. As I said earlier, we were leaders in respecting democracy. Here in the House, we were able to debate legislation and to amend and adopt motions that were respectful of everyone's choices. We cannot do that anymore. This government has brought in 17 time allocation motions.

Between the Conservatives' electoral fraud and the Liberals' unfair tactics, it is not surprising that Canadians think Ottawa is corrupt. Only the NDP respects Canadians and is determined to help Canadian families move forward. The Conservatives must start co-operating with Elections Canada and stop blaming everyone else, including Elections Canada, for this so-called election fraud.

The NDP not only wants to throw light on the deplorable situation that allegedly arose during the last election campaign, but it also wants to ensure that major reforms are made right now. The motion mentions six months, but we have to take action right now to ensure that this type of scandal never happens again. The government has done nothing to assist the investigation into the so-called election fraud during the last election or to make sure that what was done is never repeated.

•(1615)

That is why our motion would make it possible to strengthen the authority of Elections Canada by giving it greater powers to carry out its investigations. That is what we want. We will give our full support to this motion.

[*English*]

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague's comments were very passionate and he provided a good overview of this unfolding situation of alleged voter fraud and the calls that took place. I agree with everything he said, particularly the fact that the NDP has been very proactive on this issue and has brought it to the floor of the House of Commons.

I attended a big rally in Vancouver last Saturday. Hundreds of people came out, on two or three days notice, because they were so incensed and upset about the alleged election fraud, the calls that had taken place and the people who had been misdirected. We heard the Conservative government try to frame this as somehow isolated incidents or one person being fired. However, I can tell the member, and I am sure he knows, that there were 31,000 calls to Elections Canada alone.

I think people know this was quite systematic. Could the member respond to that? We are not dealing with isolated incidents; we are dealing with a systematic attempt in terms of what happened in the election.

•(1620)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Rousseau: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her excellent question.

Setting up a system for the type of calls that were made during the last election does not happen overnight. It takes more than two or three volunteers to put the pieces together and set up a system to harass voters and flood them with all kinds of calls, especially misleading calls. Putting all of those pieces together takes structure, a system set up by people who know what they are doing and are well aware of the consequences of their actions, actions that affect the outcome of an election.

[*English*]

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, so far over the course of these discussions in the last week or so we have heard the Prime Minister's parliamentary secretary give three explanations for the misdirected calls on election day.

Business of Supply

First, he said that the opposition parties did it to themselves, trying to suppress their own vote. The second explanation was that it was Elections Canada making calls. Of course we know Elections Canada does not make calls. Third, he said that a party might have done it accidentally, trying to correct the information because polling stations had changed, which is in and of itself against the Canada Elections Act. Any information given about a change in a poll is for internal purposes only. Members are not to call people and tell them this.

Could the member comment on the responses the parliamentary secretary has given to us and the excuses he has used?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Rousseau: Mr. Speaker, the government is playing at smoke and mirrors. It is trying to distract voters and people. When honest people who have lost faith in our electoral system hear that, they think that the system does not work. They wonder if there is any point, and they decide that they will not bother to vote because it is pointless and nothing ever happens.

The NDP is not okay with that. We will stand up, we will do politics differently in order to change things. That is why we are here, and that is why we will support the member for Hamilton Centre's motion.

The government is running around like a dog chasing its tail. I have always had a sense of humour. There is nothing logical about what is going on. The government is trying to distract and confuse people.

[*English*]

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think I am glad to join this debate. It is an unfortunate one, but it is here and we will have to get to the bottom of it. Whether we like some of what is being tossed around or whatever, it will have to be done. It did not come as a result of anything that Liberals did, that is for sure.

I am fortunate to have an opportunity to speak today. I am splitting my time with my great colleague from Guelph. Whoever was behind trying to prevent him from coming back here, I am so glad that person lost. We have a great member and we want to keep him here.

This morning, when I opened my newspaper, I was surprised and pleased to read that the government had finally reversed itself on an important issue of national electoral accountability. The headline optimistically spoke to the government's impending flip-flop on the issue of giving Elections Canada the investigative power for which it had clearly asked.

Despite this projection and my optimism that maybe this issue was going to finally be dealt with in a more positive way, the Prime Minister earlier today signalled he was preparing for yet another about face on something that was very important to Canadians. After stonewalling for weeks, the government has finally, but reluctantly, bowed to public pressure, maybe. We will see what happens over the weekend.

Members can understand the confusion about the Cons position. Just a couple of days ago, the Prime Minister stood in the House and attempted to convince Canadians, as he did with the in and out, that he was the only member who had heard nothing about Elections

Canada's request for important new powers. That shocking and unbelievable statement was made following the coordinated and shameful actions of government MPs to block new and important audit powers for the Chief Electoral Officer. What could they possibly be afraid of if they are all so innocent?

What is the government's position at 4:25 p.m. on Thursday afternoon? Perhaps the government should just come clean and be honest about a few things. Media spending in the 2006 election, voter suppression in the 2011 election and its position on the matter of giving Elections Canada the power to sort this out quickly and decisively so we do not continue some of the rants that have gone on in the House today and other days.

The robocall and the voter suppression tactics used in the last election seemed to emanate from somewhere within the governing party. We are not entirely certain of all of the details, but rather than helping to dispel these concerns, the government has adopted a strategy, similar to what it has done before on the in and out and others, and that is deny, deny, distract and disguise. That is the game plan.

If only the government would stop stonewalling and start cooperating with those seeking to sort this out, this would not have to continue in the manner that it has today. The deny, deny, distract and disguise strategy, as the Conservatives clam up, has been a bit of a moving target, with answers changing continually to every question they are asked.

Let us talk about what we actually do know. When the government was faced with accusations in Guelph, the government fired a junior staffer, claiming that the 23 year old was a lone, partisan mastermind. He must be a brilliant individual to have done all of that. Then it moved to block the efforts of Elections Canada to compel documentation, and later claimed to know nothing about it. Then, as a distraction, again, it falsely claimed that the Liberal Party paid American firms to suppress our voters. Now that takes the cake for one of the most ridiculous statements I have heard in the almost 13 years I have been in the House.

This absurdity is compounded by the actual fact that earlier this month, five years after the last campaign ended, the Conservatives finally admitted to coordinated and intentional wrongdoing in the 2006 election with their in and out. As a result of its inappropriate actions, the Conservative Party will be forced to repay taxpayers \$230,198. Those are facts. We are not inventing it. We are not saying it. They are on the record, and it has just come out. The government is not appealing it. We all remember how Conservatives stood in the House and did the exact same thing, saying it was not true. They denied, distracted and disguised unlawful actions in another way.

Business of Supply

•(1625)

It was not until the RCMP and Elections Canada executed a search warrant and raided Conservative Party headquarters that the truth started to leak out on that issue. I find it unbelievable that they would have to do that to a major political party in our country.

In the 2006 election the Conservative Party exceeded its spending limits by over \$1.3 million. This illegal activity funnelled money from local campaigns to the national Conservative campaign to sidestep the rules as if to say, “Let’s not break them too much. We’ll just go around them”, so that no one would catch them. This coordinated and intentional scheme allowed the Conservatives to collect Elections Canada rebates that they did not deserve. Members will remember that we get money for every vote we get.

In November, in a related case before the criminal courts in Ontario, top Conservative officials pleaded guilty to four charges that they had knowingly violated the Canada Elections Act during the 2006 election. They were not members of the NDP or the Liberals, but four Conservatives who pleaded guilty. They were forced to pay the maximum fine possible under the Canada Elections Act. I guess they had not learned enough at that time.

These past actions have been verified by the courts, so forgive me if I have trouble accepting the new Conservative lines.

It is clear that voter suppression techniques were used in the 2011 election, as demonstrated by the firing of a Conservative staffer. So far, more than 30,000 Canadians have contacted Elections Canada with their concerns about the 2011 election.

Where does that leave us today? We have to get to the bottom of this clear affront to our most basic democratic right, the right to vote. This is critically important and something that all Canadians, all of us in the House and throughout Canada, value. People have lost their lives to provide us that right. Therefore, we should not sit back and allow votes to be completely skewed by election tactics.

The governing party has been convicted of illegal electioneering in the past, so it must co-operate with authorities in a way that will reassure Canadians that democracy is alive and well in our precious country. Elections Canada must be given the powers and resources it needs to get to the bottom of this scandal. We cannot wait five years as we did with the in and out scheme so the Conservatives can break more laws.

I suggest an alternative strategy for the Cons. If they are innocent, they should just co-operate. If they are guilty, they should come clean with Canadians.

What is on the table today? Elections Canada wants and needs the power to force political parties to verify their election expenses with detailed records and receipts. This is a very simple power that will help improve accountability for past as well as future elections. It is also a requirement already imposed on private Canadians for tax purposes. Why should the Conservatives or anyone else not have to prove their expenses before getting refund from taxpayers?

The question is this. Why is the government fighting this? If it has nothing to hide, let us put this behind us, move on and give Elections Canada the tools and resources it needs.

There is saying, “The truth shall set you free”. I know the Prime Minister’s personal fondness for songs by the Beatles. During his last public medley, he serenaded the crowd by telling them “he gets by with a little help from his friends”. I would hope he might also take note of another appropriate John Lennon song titled *Gimme Some Truth*. In case he does not know the lyric, it simply goes like this, “All I want is the truth, Just gimme some truth”.

•(1630)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. member this question.

If allegations of election fraud were made against her, her party or anyone, would she not hasten to ensure that her party provided all the evidence to prove that those allegations were not true? Would she not want the Chief Electoral Officer to have the strongest mandate possible so that he would be able to quickly come to a decision on the issue and put an end to the situation? Does she think that the Conservatives’ unwillingness to turn over the documents is logical when they could basically put an end to the allegations by doing so? What would be her attitude in such a situation?

[*English*]

Hon. Judy Sgro: Mr. Speaker, those of us who have been around a while know that Elections Canada is starved for resources. That was before all of this. We could write a letter to Elections Canada and we would get an answer back in about six months telling us that it has received our information. It was a challenge to accept the fact that Elections Canada had enough resources. We know it does not have the resources. That is why the NDP motion today is so important. Elections Canada needs the freedom to be able to do what it needs to do in a fast and efficient manner, not drag something out for 5, 8 or 10 years.

Until there is a decision by Elections Canada, a lot of what has been going on in the past will probably continue into the future. I would expect the Conservatives would want to be helpful, get to the bottom of this and put it behind them.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I find it absolutely over the top that the member is talking about this place and ethics. She has some explaining to do in her own right and for her own party. I will ask a question about procedure and House affairs and the bill before us.

She said it is very important that this legislation gets passed so the Chief Electoral Officer has these abilities. In previous meetings of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, the Chief Electoral Officer asked for these same powers. Guess who was in power at the time and guess who denied those same powers before? We have an awakening on the road to Damascus from someone whose ethics I question.

•(1635)

Hon. Judy Sgro: Mr. Speaker, any time he wants to compare ethics, I am more than ready to do it. He can meet me outside and we will have that discussion, if he would like.

Business of Supply

On the issue of ethics and my party, nobody in my party has been convicted of anything. He can throw his allegations around. Four Conservatives were convicted under the Canada Elections Act. No Liberal or NDP members were convicted, just Conservatives.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I was thinking about all of the Conservative donors. I am sure they are really thrilled with the payout of \$283,000 from their donation base and then another \$52,000 from their donation base. I imagine the next time the Conservatives call asking for money, it may not happen. Maybe donors will pass on donations for fines and settlements.

I want to ask the hon. member about her favourite preposterous argument put forward by the other side. Is it that Elections Canada did this, that the opposition parties suppressed their own votes, that polls sometimes change, that it was all orchestrated by political parties or that this is a smear by 31,000 Canadians?

Hon. Judy Sgro: Mr. Speaker, I want to go back to a comment made by one of the government members. Please excuse me as I do know which riding it was. Earlier the member talked about this kind of thing and the damage it does to Canadians' belief in democracy and to all of us who are politicians. Nobody wins with all of this. It is not a good thing when people make accusations about others. The fact is that for thousands of Canadians their votes have been denied them. They were blocked in a variety of ways. We are using hundreds of hours on an investigation that is critically important because the government will not be truthful and provide everything required to Elections Canada, including the resources.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, for the last two weeks, this House has been seized, indeed gripped, with a very important issue. It strikes at the very core of why we are here, the prospect of electoral fraud after a comprehensive, sophisticated, nationwide, organized attempt to prevent Canadians from voting through suppression calls.

Voting is a sacred duty that we try to instill in our children from a very young age. This civic duty and engagement is part of our social contract as a democratic society. Yet sadly, election after election, voter turnouts are stagnant or decreasing as voters become disenchanted, cynical and disengaged. As a result, fewer and fewer Canadians vote. With organized groups attempting to subvert our right to vote, how can we blame them?

One of the last safeguards Canadians have is Elections Canada and the Canada Elections Act, an organization and legislation that distinguish us from, and cause our electoral democracy to be revered by, most other countries. Just weeks ago, before the controversy erupted over voter suppression robocalls, the Conservative government used its majority on committee to deny Elections Canada the additional powers it was requesting to undertake its important work as the elections watchdog. Surprisingly, or not, weeks later Elections Canada would be faced with over 31,000 people calling on it to examine fraudulent and malicious voter suppression calls that went out across the country throughout the election and on election day.

The motion before us today is calling on the government to equip Elections Canada, rightfully, with the tools to ensure that in all future campaigns it will be armed with the ability to investigate even more thoroughly. This would include granting the Chief Electoral Officer the power to directly request all necessary documentation from

political parties, to ensure compliance with the Canada Elections Act, and to ensure that call centres and other telecommunications companies involved in the election are registered and that their clients are clearly identified.

On election day, almost a year ago, after knocking on doors and greeting people around the city, my wife and I arrived at my campaign office to find it in a state of chaos. My campaign staff were frantically answering the phone calls of hundreds of Guelphites who received fraudulent robocalls from a person claiming to be from Elections Canada. The caller informed them that, due to high voter turnout, their polling location had changed to the Old Quebec Street Mall. We rushed over as fast as we could with drivers to ensure voters were given the opportunity to get to their proper voting location. There is no telling how late we were for some voters.

I remember very clearly speaking to a young woman and her older father who had received the call. As the Old Quebec Street Mall was out of their way, they had made an effort to come out, only to discover they had been misled. Frustrated, they were turning away to go home when they saw me in the mall. The young woman explained to me that she and her father had stood in line, only to be turned away after getting a call changing their voting station. They were tired and frustrated. She needed to get her father home and they would not be voting in this election. I was saddened as I watched them go, knowing that something, someone or some group of ill-intentioned people had prevented them from voting. I did not know then that it was as pervasive, organized and sophisticated a campaign across Canada as it is now revealing itself to be.

In the weeks following the election, I submitted a list of 80 names we were able to record on election day, with comments and in some cases call display numbers from their phones. These 80 electors had received a robocall from someone purporting to be with Elections Canada misdirecting voters to the wrong polling station. These events were reported in Guelph media but did not break nationally until recently. That is what prompted Canadians from coast to coast to recall the events of that day. We now know that the number which showed up on so many call displays was that now-infamous 450 area code, from a disposable cell phone bought under the name Pierre Poutine, registered to a Separatist Street in Joliette, Quebec but used in Guelph. Of course, this is a ridiculous pseudonym cribbed from a restaurant in Guelph. The phone made two calls to Conservative call centre RackNine, one presumably to set up an account and the other to record and distribute the malicious and fraudulent call which misled voters on election day.

Business of Supply

•(1640)

Pierre Poutine was not the only Guelph connection with a relationship to RackNine. A campaign staffer for the Conservative candidate also had an undisclosed commercial relationship with RackNine. This is illegal under the Canada Elections Act.

Days after the story broke, just weeks ago, the Conservative government was all too happy to throw a 23-year-old staffer under the bus. The Minister of National Defence declared the case closed once this young man had taken the rap. Interestingly, the staffer denied his involvement. He called on the real guilty party to come forward. Of course, we have learned in the past couple of weeks just how far reaching these fraudulent calls were that were made across the country. We know now that this was much too complicated an operation for a lone Conservative partisan in Guelph to execute.

In my riding, voters were misdirected to the Old Quebec Street Mall, while in Saanich—Gulf Islands, British Columbia, voters were misdirected to St. John's United Church. In Sydney, Nova Scotia, the other side of the country, voters were asked to travel 30 kilometres out of their way to vote in New Waterford. This happened in ridings throughout Canada. This required organization with a national scope, significant financial resources and access to a national list of electors who had been identified as Liberals, NDP or Green supporters, or people who would not say how they were voting.

The Conservative Party wants Canadians to believe that this is all an unsubstantiated smear by the opposition. It cannot deny the evidence offered by over 31,000 Canadians who complained about these calls in recent weeks, or the thousands who called their candidates on election day.

Take for instance Arnold Dodds, from Kingston, who reported receiving a phone call soliciting his support for the Conservative Party during the election. He said he was a Conservative supporter, but because Conservatives unnecessarily closed a prison farm he would no longer be voting Conservative. Not surprisingly, he received a phone call on election day misdirecting him to the wrong poll. Similarly, Peggy Walsh Craig was sent to the wrong poll in Nipissing—Timiskaming, just as Raymond Young was in Sydney—Victoria, Cape Breton.

Therein lies the pattern across Canada. The Conservatives may accuse these individuals of unsubstantiated smears, but aside from the denial and allegations clearly betraying their own insecurity, there is no way that so many Canadians are inventing such a malicious electoral fraud. Since opening its investigation in Guelph, Elections Canada has expanded its investigation to include Thunder Bay, Kingston and Nipissing—Timiskaming.

What is clear from the fallout of the scandalous behaviour in the last election is that the Canada Elections Act needs to be retooled to better equip Elections Canada investigators. Politics is now a professional industry of marketers, communications experts and subterfuge imported from the neo-conservative movement in the United States. The Conservative Party has created an atmosphere in Ottawa and across the country where it is acceptable to smear an opponent. It did it to Michael Ignatieff. It did it to the member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville. Taliban Jack was a Conservative creation. Most recently, it suggested that those who were opposed

to its wholly inappropriate Internet monitoring bill were friends of child pornographers. There is no good policy for them, just politics.

For the good of the state of our democracy, we need these changes. If we are going to make this work, we will need to equip the CEO of Elections Canada with the tools necessary to ensure effective oversight and compliance with the financial reporting of political parties. In particular, Elections Canada, and the CEO specifically, should have the power to obtain documentary evidence from political parties regarding the documentation of expenses. That way the Conservative members would no longer be able to hide behind their tired talking points that it is up to the opposition to provide documents, clearing ourselves of the ridiculous charge of suppressing our own vote.

What happened in Guelph was fundamentally disheartening because it discouraged so many people from voting. When I was back in the riding last week I was speaking with Donald Miller. He told me he received one of the robocalls fraudulently misleading him to the Old Quebec Street Mall. Tired, exasperated and not completely mobile, he gave up and decided not to vote. On election day I sent out a phone message to supporters and our local radio station began warning listeners in Guelph that the robocalls were false and to go and vote at their original location. This man, who served his country in the navy during the second world war, told me he mustered up the strength and decided to vote. He would never let these people get away with trying to take away a right he had fought and bled for.

This is why the Canada Elections Act requires amendment. We owe it to Canadians, like this veteran in my riding, and to Canadians across the country, to never let such an abomination occur again. We must get to the bottom of the who, what, where, and why of these robocalls. It is imperative that we institute the appropriate measures to prevent something so horrible from happening again.

•(1645)

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first and foremost, I would like to tell the hon. member for Guelph that he has my full support in the battle to find out what happened in his riding, which will likely be a long process. The first pieces of evidence submitted are absolutely inadmissible and unacceptable.

I would like to know what the hon. member thinks about two things. I heard a political commentator say that, under the law, impersonating an Elections Canada official is like impersonating a police officer.

Business of Supply

I would like to hear the hon. member's reaction to this analysis and to another thing that I found very interesting. I would like to point out that, for the past few days, the Conservatives have been changing their tune. They started by saying that these were unsubstantiated smears, but for the past two days, they have been talking about exaggerated allegations. Things are getting interesting.

I would like to hear the hon. member's reaction to these two things.

[*English*]

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Speaker, first, impersonating an Elections Canada officer with the sole purpose of diverting someone away from doing something that our country's men and women died for, the right to exercise a vote, is absolutely despicable.

Second, in response to the second part of the member's question, the Peggy Walsh Craigs of the world from Nipissing—Timiskaming, the Raymond Youngs from Sydney—Victoria who were asked to go to New Waterford 30 kilometres away, the Danny Boyles and Donald Millers who were told to go to the Quebec Street Mall, the Arnold Dodds in Kingston who were told to go elsewhere, and the Eduardo Hararis in York Centre who were misdirected. Those are just some of the thousands of people who never had their opportunity that day to vote. Some of them did not vote. We will never be able to tell who was so confused or frustrated that he or she declined to exercise his or her most sacred right on that day.

•(1650)

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can tell the hon. colleague across the floor that should there be any situation in Guelph that is deemed to be inappropriate, I will be truly sorry, as I think every member in the House would be, because that is not what we stand for.

However, what I am concerned about right now is the allegation of 31,000 complaints. There is no one in the House and most people do not know that those were solicited from party hacks on form letters and that the vast majority of those are not real complaints but are solicited.

I will back that up with a document that I have, which is really disturbing. This was put forward by the member for Wascana who said, "We are concerned about this. Send us your money. Send us \$5. Let me use this as a fundraiser for the Liberal Party and, of course, don't send your information or concern to Elections Canada, send it to the Liberal Party of Canada so we may share with media outlets or in mass communications such as email blasts", i.e. robocalls.

The Liberals are suggesting that now rather than putting the information forward to Elections Canada. How could the hon. member suggest that we would report to the Liberal Party rather than Elections Canada. He knows fully well that we have asked for full disclosure from the Liberal Party of Canada and it has been refused to this date. Why will it not be forthcoming?

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Speaker, unashamedly, I can say that the rest of us in the House are Boy Scouts when it comes to raising funds based on issues. You did it with the Wheat Board, you did it with the gun registry, send us money, send us money. How dare you point across the House and accuse us of doing something like that? That is just shameful.

An hon. member: How dare you.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please. If members cannot control themselves, they should remove themselves from this chamber.

Once again, I would ask the hon. member for Guelph to address the Chair and not his colleagues in the chamber.

The hon. member for Guelph.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Speaker, I shall, absolutely. The point is that people were deprived of the right to vote that day because they were misdirected to polls that did not exist or they ought not to have gone to. The crux of this argument is that someone, and we would suggest that the fingers are pointing to the party opposite, misdirected these voters, not just in Guelph but on a national scale in ridings across the country.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to take the floor today, and I want to say to the people here present, and those watching on CPAC, how totally absurd the Conservatives' discourse has been for several days now. Unfortunately, I greatly appreciate many of them outside this chamber. They are very nice individuals. However, when it comes time to defend the errors and wild imaginings that go on here, they put the blame on the Liberals.

One hon. member asked a question and said that the Liberals had done the same thing. I have the real impression of being back in the high school recreation yard, with "Same to you!" going back and forth. It is completely absurd. The Conservatives' rhetoric is completely incoherent. They are ridiculing so important a situation as this, which in daily life affects the fundamental human rights contained in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Day after day, they are laughing in the face of Canadians and those members who are doing their job here. It is truly intolerable.

It is important today to point out the deep roots of the word "democracy". Its etymology is derived from the word "*demos*", which means people, and "*kratos*", which means sovereignty. So in fact, democracy is a political system founded on the principle that sovereignty belongs to all the citizens, who can express themselves through universal suffrage. All western societies are familiar with this basic principle, whatever electoral system they have. It is part of the very foundations of our society.

When the right to vote, fundamental rights, elections and the political system of a country are violated, what can work in that country? As a law student, I always admired democratic institutions. I have always fought for people's fundamental rights. Today we hear the government's watchdog barking in question period that the Liberals should provide evidence that they are not the ones who made calls. Why would they have made calls so that their own members would not be elected? Frankly, this is totally incoherent.

Business of Supply

The NDP made calls in Quebec to tell people not to go and vote for the NDP? Frankly, this is totally incoherent. It is clear here that the Conservatives are running in circles, chasing their own tails, as my colleague was saying, and no longer know what to say to justify the scandal that is now blowing up in their faces.

Canadians expect the electoral process to be honest and reliable. An honest process means respect for the law. It is important that full light be shed on this scandal. If the Conservatives had nothing to do with it and are absolutely sure that there was no election fraud, why do they continue to hide behind responses that are totally absurd and accusations that have no foundation whatsoever?

They say the Liberals are making unfounded accusations, but they are doing exactly the same thing. They should stop running in circles, answer the questions and do the job for which they were elected by Canadians, instead of doing what they think they ought to do. It is very clear: Canadians have the right to know. Every day the Conservatives say they want to protect future generations, and that is exactly what the NDP motion does. It protects the democratic system for future generations; it protects the electoral system for future elections.

They come every day to this chamber claiming they want to protect old age security for future generations, but that would surprise me. What is more, they say they want to protect future generations and the economy, but then when we try to change the laws so that things as fundamental as the electoral system are respected, they want nothing to do with it. This is completely intolerable.

• (1655)

Then when they come back to us in question period talking about future generations, about protecting young people, I do not believe them, Canadians do not believe them anymore, it is all false. I hope that the government will take our motion into consideration and vote in favour of it. Then, they will perhaps be able to say that they really do want to protect our electoral system, our democracy and our future generations. We will see what happens next Monday, when members vote on our motion. Will the government vote for it? And more importantly, will they take it into account and implement it?

When they talk about a higher voter turnout, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, comparatively speaking, voter turnout in Canada is lower than it is in many other countries. We have heard a number of Conservative MPs say that the rate of participation has increased. However, we are one of the western countries with the lowest voter turnout rate, particularly among young people. It is a fact. I do not want to compare Canada with other countries, but I would just like to say that the mere fact that there has been a slight increase in voter turnout does not justify the Conservatives' refusal to give more power to the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Canada. In any case, this argument has no significance here. We are one of the countries with the lowest voter turnout rate, especially among young people.

It is important today to make a decision for future generations, to protect our democratic system and especially to stop people from losing confidence in this House. We are all here for the same reason; we are all here to represent Canadians. It does not matter whether you are in the government or in the official opposition. That does not

change the reason why we are here, which is to defend the interests of Canadians, to protect our Constitution and our democracy. I am completely outraged today to see the Conservatives trying to make the Liberals and the NDP take the blame, when they should be here for the same reason: to protect our democracy and our electoral system.

It is obvious that if they vote against the motion, it shows that they are not here to do that. I am really looking forward to finding out what questions they will ask me. We will find out what their position is. I invite them to ask me questions and to tell me whether they are going to support our motion, whether they are going to support our democracy and our electoral system. We will see when I have finished my speech.

We also know, according to the government, that we are either with them or against them. We know that, for this government, a good idea is an American idea. We know just how perfect the Americans are, and that Canada should try and imitate them because their country is so wonderful. The Conservatives completely neglect everything that Canadians have accomplished in our country and that makes us the most wonderful country in the world. I am so proud to say this, and to say that I come from the most beautiful province in the country, Quebec.

We know that several Conservatives are enrolling in Karl Rove's summer school. Everybody knows who Karl Rove is. He is one of George W. Bush's greatest American strategists, known for his master strokes. So, let us all go to class and learn how to rig the election in Canada! It is time to let go of the ideological "Rovian" vote that brought the Canadian Pierre Poutine into the world, leave behind underhand political tactics, and take a stand against election fraud.

If there has been no election fraud, why did the Conservatives refuse to participate in any investigations? Why did they try and blame the opposition parties? Why not simply hand over powers to the Chief Electoral Officer? He will conduct his investigation and discover that there was no fraud. That would be fine. So why refuse that? It is especially hilarious that, every day, this government comes and beats us over the head with its tough on crime ideology: follow the law, put criminals in prison, do this, do that, spend money to build prisons. Yet, when it comes to something as fundamental as our democratic system, they say no, that is not possible, and that Elections Canada has the powers it needs. They do not want to give Elections Canada any more power.

• (1700)

Why? I do not know. We will probably never know unless the Conservatives decide to give this power to the Chief Electoral Officer, so that he can conduct his investigation. It is at that point that the government will be able to truly say that it is transparent, open, and tough on crime.

Business of Supply

I would like to talk about a week in the life of the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister ; it is hugely exciting. The parliamentary secretary has stated on several occasions that there is no evidence that fraudulent calls were made to voters in the last election. Yet, in addition to the evidence sent by the NDP to Elections Canada, 31,000 people contacted Elections Canada. Is the parliamentary secretary denying the participation of these 31,000 people? Is he saying that these 31,000 people lied and that the opposition parties concocted the whole scandal? Is that really what he is telling us? Throughout the week, all of my colleagues and I have been accused of conducting a smear campaign. Can the parliamentary secretary rise and say to these 31,000 Canadians and to many others in a dozen ridings that they are liars and that they never received these calls?

Is he prepared to rise and tell the House now that Canadians are liars and they have made this up? That is truly absurd. He is not going to do it because he knows very well that there has been election fraud and there has to be an investigation. But when will Elections Canada be able to get the powers it needs? That is the question the government is being asked. A motion has been brought forward today to do that and I sincerely hope the government is going to wake up.

The Prime Minister has said several times, elsewhere in the world, how democratic and just a society Canada is. That is true. I am genuinely proud to be part of this society, but I am going to be even prouder when the government passes our motion today and gives Elections Canada the justice it is calling for. Canadians are also entitled to have justice done.

The government is blaming Elections Canada. The member for Saskatoon—Wanuskewin said he suspects that ultimately, if Elections Canada has the resources to carry out an adequate investigation, it will realize that it is itself largely responsible. The government is putting the blame on Elections Canada, on the opposition parties, on Canadians, but it is refusing to put the blame on itself.

I feel like I am in a schoolyard here. We are hearing things like “I know you are, but what am I?”, that we have no proof and so we cannot say anything. That is not how it works. We are adults and we are in the House of Commons. We represent Canadians. Can we not act accordingly and live up to our responsibilities?

You are the government. You have to enact laws. You have to make sure that justice is done. You have to make sure that Canadians have confidence in our Parliament, in our system of justice. Yes, Mr. Speaker, I am speaking to you.

An hon. member: Stop shouting, we can hear you just fine.

Ms. Ève Pécelet: I am sorry, but I have the right to speak. I will speak as I wish in the House and no Conservative will tell me how to speak and what to say. It is the last straw, to tell me how to speak. I speak here on behalf of Canadians, of the people from my riding. If I want to shout at injustice and at this government’s failure to act, I will do it today, in this House. I am sorry, but if I want to shout and tell the government members that they are completely incoherent, that they have committed election fraud, that they have broken our electoral system...

● (1705)

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order. The hon. member for Ottawa—Orléans is rising on a point of order.

[Translation]

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if you could inform the hon. member opposite that the sound system works very well and that we can hear everything just fine, without even using the listening device. We find her speech very interesting. If she is ready to vote on the motion, so are we.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Does the hon. member for Montmagny—L’Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup wish to speak on the same point of order?

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L’Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would simply like to point out that my hon. colleague is under 30 and is just beginning her political career. She is making a very simple point, that is, her indignation. If she needs to shout to express her indignation, she has every right to do so.

● (1710)

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I do not really see a point of order here, but I do thank the member for Ottawa—Orléans for his intervention. Members will know that there is a great deal of liberty and freedom for members to express their views in the way they choose. We do not have a point of order. We will continue.

While I am on my feet, I will remind hon. members that at 5:15 p.m., we will come to the end of the time allocated for government orders.

The hon. member for Rivière-du-Nord.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, our friends across the floor are asking my colleague to keep her voice down. I believe this is a breach of members’ privileges. It is a question of privilege. It is a breach of the member’s privileges, since she has the right to express herself in this House, using respectful language of course, in whatever tone she likes. It is a question of privilege.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): As I said, this is not a point of order. As I told the hon. member for Ottawa—Orléans, members have quite a bit of freedom. It is their choice.

[English]

Members have some liberty in how they wish to express their ideas. The hon. member has every opportunity to express her views in the way that she chooses.

[Translation]

The hon. member for La Pointe-de-l’Île.

Ms. Ève Pécelet: Mr. Speaker, I would like to conclude my speech by saying that if some Conservative members were insulted, that was not at all my intention and I apologize. I did not insult anyone. I insulted the government as a whole.

Private Members' Business

I would simply like to say that if the government really wants to maintain any credibility with Canadians, all it has to do is give Elections Canada the power to conduct investigations. Then we will see what happens next.

I now leave the floor to my colleagues, if they wish to ask me any questions.

Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we really appreciate the hon. member's comments and point of view.

I have an urgent question for her because, unless I am mistaken, she was one of the parachute candidates who started out with credibility issues. The only thing likely to blow up in her face is her own credibility. That is the expression she herself used.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. The hon. member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup on a point of order.

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we must not slide down the slippery slope of judging the credibility of an elected representative. We were all elected by universal suffrage. She was elected.

I would ask my hon. colleague to withdraw his suggestion that one elected representative has more or less credibility than another.
[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): If members could give me a moment, on the point of order by the member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, it is true that members are discouraged from making reference to the nature in which members manage their responsibilities in their own constituencies. While I do not see anything unparliamentary in what the parliamentary secretary has said, I certainly offer that as encouragement to other hon. members that they may steer away from this kind of narrative.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was only saying that her comments lacked credibility for the following reason: in her speech she urged the House and Elections Canada to conduct a thorough investigation into the allegations. That investigation is within the purview of Elections Canada, and everyone on this side of the House wishes to see the investigation carried to completion.

She also talked about electoral fraud that has already been proven. That is what she said. She was quite angry; everyone said so. She cannot say both things at the same time. Either she is in favour of a democratic process carried out by Elections Canada, or she has already decided what the outcome of that process should be. I ask the hon. member opposite: which is it?

• (1715)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member only has time for a brief reply.

Ms. Ève Pécelet: Mr. Speaker, I would like to apologize to all my constituents for the comments made by the parliamentary secretary. It is up to them, and not the hon. parliamentary secretary, to decide whether or not I am doing a good job. They voted for me, and it will be up to them to decide in four years.

I am sorry, but the Conservative Party has already been found guilty of electoral fraud. It already has to pay back \$230,000 of taxpayers' money to Elections Canada. When it comes to electoral fraud, the Conservative Party is in no position to preach to the other parties and other members in the House.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): It being 5:15 p.m., pursuant to order made earlier today, all questions necessary to dispose of the opposition motion are deemed put and the recorded division is deemed to have been demanded and deferred until Monday, March 12, 2012, at the end of government orders.

[*English*]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I ask that you see the clock at 5:30 p.m.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Is it agreed to see the clock at 5:30 p.m.?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): It being 5:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[*English*]

CANADA WATER PRESERVATION ACT

The House resumed from November 23, 2011 consideration of the motion that Bill C-267, An Act respecting the preservation of Canada's water resources, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured as the New Democratic Party critic for natural resources to speak to this legislation with respect to Canada's water resources. We have seen this legislation twice before in the House. We welcome the bill at second reading.

I know that many Canadians are interested in fostering the sustainable use of Canada's water resources and preventing the removal of water in bulk from major drainage basins in Canada. We know how essential water is as a resource for life, people and our planet. In many ways, water defines and distinguishes our country.

As a member from northern Ontario, my flights home to Nickel Belt and travelling around the north of this province remind me of the abundance of this resource and, equally, the importance of its safekeeping. We have in northern Ontario part of Lake Huron and all of Lake Superior. Moreover, there are numerous border crossings with the United States and joint water tributaries that remind me of the importance of good legislation to monitor and protect this resource.

Private Members' Business

New Democrats will be supporting this legislation at second reading because we want it to go committee to receive the scrutiny it deserves and to deal with several concerns that we believe need to be addressed. Among those concerns is the absence of any guidance to direct the Governor in Council in setting the definition of what constitutes a major drainage basin in the regulations. This is a crucial definition that, by and large, will determine the effectiveness or real power of this bill. Without the definition, we would be talking about all or no drainage basin. If the definition chosen by the government includes none of the major drainage basins, the act could be rendered inapplicable.

We are also concerned that the act gives the government very wide regulatory powers, including the ability to redefine the scope of the expectations through regulations, as well as the ability to make regulations providing for any other expectations. These regulatory powers seem overly broad and could permit the government to rewrite the act using these regulatory powers.

Further, the prohibitions in the act appear to be limited to the removal of water in bulk through diversion, and would not apply to the removal of water in bulk via pumping of water into a ship or truck, for example. If we are to oppose bulk water exports, we need to ensure that the act covers all means of exporting our water.

Finally, this act contains an exception for manufactured water products, including bottled water and beverages, a large loophole that we believe is also worth examining at committee.

I commend the member for Lac-Saint-Louis for again introducing this legislation.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

Canadians have had an interest in protecting Canada's water resources for decades, especially when it comes to the issue of bulk water exports. The NDP has always called for prohibiting bulk water exports. We believe that this should be a key component of a national water policy—something Canada does not have—that would establish clean drinking water standards, provide for rigorous environmental protection measures for water resources, and recognize water as a common right.

A number of major water diversion plans in water corridors have been proposed in the past 40 years. These corridors would have transferred considerable quantities of water from Canada to the United States. None of these projects got off the ground, for various reasons. However, this remains a possibility. We must pass rigorous legislation to counter such projects.

[*English*]

I have seen other precious resources in our ground mined and exported with too little regard for Canadian priorities and needs. That must not happen with our water.

This legislation before us today also calls to mind the NAFTA agreement and how it has long been considered a threat to Canada's water sovereignty.

On several occasions, the NDP has brought forward motions here in the House of Commons to protect our fresh water. In February

1999 after debate, the House of Commons adopted an NDP motion to place an immediate moratorium on the export of bulk freshwater shipments and inter-basin transfers. The motion also instructed the government to introduce legislation to prohibit bulk freshwater exports and inter-basin transfers and recommended that it not become party to any international agreement that compelled us to export fresh water against our will.

In that same year, 1999, the Liberal government of the day announced that it would consult the provinces and territories to develop a strategy that would prohibit the bulk removal of water from Canadian watersheds, whether for domestic purposes or export. Regrettably, the strategy did not address the trade issues and concerns posed by NAFTA, focusing instead on water protection through water management. There is a relative consensus that the Liberals' Canada-wide water accord, with its environmental focus, does not contain enough protection from bulk water export.

In June 2007, the House adopted another New Democrat motion calling for the government to initiate talks with its American and Mexican counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA.

We know that in 2010 the government tabled Bill C-26, which aimed to ban bulk water. The bill did not progress beyond first reading and, indeed, was quite a feeble attempt to ban bulk water exports. It actually left 80% of Canada's surface water unprotected, as it only contained a prohibition on the removal of transboundary waters and not a prohibition on the inter-basin diversion or transfer of waters into transboundary waters, which left the door open for water pipelines to be built, like those proposed in the 1990s. We also opposed that bill for not addressing statutory exceptions that permitted the export of bottled water or other beverages. In fact, the bill did nothing to address bulk water trade concerns.

We want the government to acknowledge that Canada's water resources need further protection with respect to NAFTA via negotiations leading to an agreement that excludes water from NAFTA as a commercial good. Water should instead be listed as a human right and we need an acknowledgement of our respective sovereign rights to manage water as part of the public trust.

New Democrats have a history of defending Canada's water. In both 1999 and 2007 the House adopted NDP motions instructing the government to take steps to better protect Canada's water resources, and we are urging the government to respect the intent of those motions.

We must get it right this time to genuinely protect our water. We know that an overwhelming majority of Canadians support a ban on bulk water exports. We need to ensure that Canada maintains control through both a bulk water ban and the protections offered by a national water policy.

Bulk water removal poses concerns not just for the Canadians' drinking water but also for the cumulative effects it could have on the ecosystems of our water basins and watersheds. Policy-makers should also consider issues of water consumption as well as population and economic growth.

Further, we need more study of the effects of climate change on Canada's environment, and water resources must be examined in that regard, in particular, drought and changing weather patterns. Our water resource policy should take that into account. Here I would note that residents in northern Ontario with homes or cottages along Lake Huron and Lake Superior have seen dramatic changes in the water levels of the Great Lakes. In some recent years they have been able to walk hundreds of feet on new beaches that were once under water.

Policy-makers should also consider issues of consumption, population and economic growth.

● (1725)

When I look around our new Parliament since the May 2, 2011 election, I see that the members elected cover an amazing seven decades in their ages. This new dynamic of intergenerational partnership reaffirms the need to pass forward-thinking legislation that recognizes that a healthy and ecologically balanced planet is the most important gift we can give to future generations of Canadians.

To do this, parliamentarians have the duty and obligation to ensure that they understand the environmental consequences of current actions on future generations. This includes acting as responsible stewards of our water resources.

[Translation]

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saannich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the issue today is critical. Fresh water is the source of all forms of life on earth. The protection and conservation of fresh water are political issues of the 21st century. Seen from space, Canada has one of the largest supplies of water in the world, but on the ground the situation is very different. Our water consumption is concentrated in a specific geographic area: 60% of our watercourses flow to the north of the country, but over 90% of the population is concentrated along the southern border.

As custodians of 9% of the planet's renewable water resources, we have a moral obligation to preserve them for our generation and future generations. Thank God this is an issue on which there is consensus. For example, in the throne speech of November 19, 2008, the government said: "To ensure protection of our vital resources, our Government will bring in legislation to ban all bulk water transfers or exports from Canadian freshwater basins."

[English]

We had that commitment before. I spoke of the Speech from the Throne in 2008.

When I worked many years ago, as part of the previous government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, that was the last time Canada took a comprehensive look at our water resources. The federal water policy, which remains the only federal water policy passed to this date, was passed in 1987. The Government of Canada committed to a federal water policy, which included that we would ban bulk water exports. Yet we stand here, more than 20 years later, without that prohibition.

I am very grateful to my friend for the introduction of Bill C-267, which ascribes in every respect to the best possible approach to how to ban the transfer of bulk water from one basin to another. I am

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aware, and I thank my friend, the member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, for a similar bill, Bill C-383. I would wish we had the ability to blend the two. However, there is no question that Bill C-267 responds to the issue in a way in which it must be responded.

The bill respecting the preservation of Canada's water resources before us this evening deals with the issue in terms of the inter-basin transfer of water. There are five major drainage basins for all of the water of Canada. If we think about it, it is very logical and intuitive. All our water drains toward larger areas. The five major drainage basins are the Arctic Ocean, Hudson Bay, the Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific Ocean and even the Gulf of Mexico from which our Great Lakes drain toward the south. These are the five major drainage basins and it is to these drainage basins that Bill C-267 speaks by prohibiting the inter-basin transfer of water, prohibiting the massive transfer of water in bulk.

This is critical because Bill C-383 is quite similar to a previous government legislation, Bill C-26. It dealt only with boundary and transboundary water. It is important for us to remember that when we are looking at boundary and transboundary water, we are looking at 10% of Canada's water resources. In other words, 90% of Canada's water resources are found in basins that could not be defined as boundary or transboundary water. As such, the acts we will be looking at later in this session, the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act and the International River Improvement Act, are certainly laudable, but fall far short of what we need, which is why if it were possible to include the provisions of both bills together, we would have stronger legislation.

I do not have quite the same concern as the hon. member for Nickel Belt about the fact that it is left to regulations to describe a drainage basin. There is no question, however, since there really are five drainage basins for Canada and they are well known and are a matter of scientific fact, that it certainly would be wise to include them when the bill goes to committee and comes to amendment. That would leave no wiggle room for some sort of political fix that would deny the hydrogeology of Canada's land mass to try to say that there was something other than five major drainage basins. It is a scientific fact that is what there is.

We have always had the threat when we look at the transfer of basin water from one to the other. The most grandiose of these schemes was put forward repeatedly in the early 1980s. The grand canal scheme was the idea that we would move water from one basin, the Hudson Bay drainage basin, and put it into pipelines to ship down to the U.S. That grand canal scheme would not be at all affected by private member's Bill C-383, which deals with boundary and transboundary water. However, it would be completely caught by Bill C-267, which speaks to the key issue, and that is the removal of water in bulk.

Under the interpretation and definition section of the bill, it states, "removal of water in bulk" means the removal of water, whether it has been treated or not, from the major drainage basin in which the water is located by any means of diversion that includes a pipeline, canal, tunnel, aqueduct or channel", which is a perfect way of ensuring the grand canal scheme never happens, "or by any other means of diversion by which more than 50,000 litres of water per day is removed from major drainage basin".

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●(1730)

This speaks to ecological realities. It is not a political statement of a boundary. It speaks to the key issue, which is how do we ensure that we do not commit a serious and egregious error in which Canada's water is moved from one basin to another. We think we are a water-rich nation, but the reality is we only have 9% of the world's renewable water, the U.S. has 6%. We are roughly in the same territory. For all the water we have, what we have is precious and we have to protect it.

The other reason for this legislation does not come from an ecological threat. It comes from the reality of NAFTA. We have a situation where under the North American Free Trade Agreement, should we allow a single transaction of the shipment of water in bulk from one drainage basin to the other, particularly from one drainage basin in Canada for sale in the United States, we would then have turned a tap on and would be simply impossible under the terms of NAFTA to turn off.

The reason one could say that water is not covered under NAFTA is that water in its natural state in natural water bodies and water courses is not a good in trade. The minute we make that a good in trade, then the taps are open everywhere.

It is critical that Canada protects our water sources by prohibiting the transfer of water in bulk, prohibiting its sale, prohibiting water in its natural state from ever being seen as a good in commerce.

One last reason why the legislation is essential is we may feel awash in water, but the impact of the climate crisis, as the previous member has mentioned, will have its primary initial impact on reducing our access to water, its quality and its quantity. That is why I am so very proud to stand as the member of Parliament for Saanich—Gulf Islands and as the leader of the Green Party of Canada to speak, to plead that the House lives up to the commitments that were made in 1987 in the federal water policy and to the commitment of the current Prime Minister in the Speech from the Throne of 2008 to ban bulk water exports.

We need to take precautionary measures now. I plead with all members of the House to ensure that Bill C-267 lives up to the promises of generations to protect our fresh water in our country.

●(1735)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I support the bill introduced by the hon. member for Lac-Saint-Louis, which is a step in the right direction.

We New Democrats have long been calling for a law that bans bulk water exports. On February 9, 1999, the House of Commons adopted an NDP motion to impose an immediate moratorium on bulk freshwater exports and interbasin transfers. We thank the hon. member for Lac-Saint-Louis for his work on this issue, which is important all across Canada.

At present, any proposal for the bulk export of water from Canadian basins or the Great Lakes would create a precedent, a situation that the Canadian authorities could not subsequently call into question. At what point does water from a river or an aquifer cease to be a common good like air or sunshine and become

merchandise? If bottled water manifestly constitutes merchandise, can water in all of its forms then be considered nothing but a commercial good?

NAFTA has long been considered a threat to Canada's sovereignty over water resources, but fortunately, there is still time to act. We can correct the problem before it is too late.

[*English*]

Under NAFTA, articles 315 and 309, it states:

—no country can reduce or restrict the export of a resource once the trade has been established. Nor can the government place an export tax or charge more to the consumers of another NAFTA country than they charge domestically.

Exports of water would have to be guaranteed to the level they had acquired over the preceding 36 months. The more water exported, the more water required to be exported. Even if new evidence were found that massive movements of water were harmful to the environment, these requirements would stay in place. That is something we cannot enter into. We truly have to protect this precious resource.

●(1740)

[*Translation*]

In other words, in the event bulk freshwater exports were to begin, the United States would be the owner in perpetuity of a share of Canada's water resources. Exported volumes could not be reduced unless the water were rationed in the same proportion for Canadian consumers and companies. The issue of bulk water exports in North America remains an explosive topic of debate, but the great majority of Canadians recognize the value of Canada's water resources and are ready to ban the large-scale removal of water.

In late 2004, according to the EKOS firm, close to 66% of Canadians would have refused the idea of selling water to their American neighbours. Even though the Americans are our friends, we have to impose certain limits on that friendship. Water is a good place to start. Public reaction seems to be motivated by the fear of seeing Canadian sovereignty done in by the United States and multinational companies. Consequently, the concerns of critics, academics, environmentalists and economists have not been allayed in recent years. It is time to put an end to the uncertainty and to protect our water resources properly.

[*English*]

My hon. colleague's constituents in Lac-Saint-Louis are neighbours to my constituents in Vaudreuil—Soulanges. Our ridings are separated by some of the most important and historic waterways in the country. The St. Lawrence River, the Ottawa River, Lac des Deux Montagnes, which is a sacred lake to the Mohawk people, and Lac Saint-Louis separate the communities in our two constituencies, but they also bring us together in the sense that these water systems are integral to the collective identity and memories of all the communities along their shores. In short, these were the historical communication routes of our early country.

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Our constituents are demanding that we protect these public goods from unrestrained exploitation and exportation. That is understandable. We do not understand how important something is until we lose it. I know the residents in Kirkland realized how important water was when their water resources were jeopardized. I realized it in my riding of Vaudreuil. When people do not have access to clean water, they realize how important it is.

This is a perfectly reasonable, not radical, request. The private member's bill in its current form does not give guidance to what constitutes a major drainage basin, which in my view is one of its shortcomings. A major drainage basin could be defined as every water basin in our communities or none of them. The strength of the bill depends on getting that definition corrected. I would encourage all the members to debate this point in committee so the bill will not one day be rendered inapplicable.

The prohibitions in the bill appear to be limited to the removal of water in bulk through diversion and would not apply to the removal of water in bulk by pumping water into another vehicle, which then would cross international borders. This should be clarified in the committee as well.

I will reiterate my support for this bill so it can be discussed further in committee to fix the aforementioned concerns regarding the strength of the bill. What is the official definition of a major drainage basin and what kind of loopholes does the bill provide for future exportation of water?

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to rise in the House of Commons today to talk about the bill introduced by my colleague and neighbour, the hon. member for Lac-Saint-Louis, Bill C-267, An Act respecting the preservation of Canada's water resources.

Canadians have been interested in protecting our country's water resources for decades, particularly with regard to bulk water exports. The NDP is in favour of sending this bill to a committee that could address the wording problems in the bill.

The purpose of this bill "is to foster the sustainable use of Canada's water resources and, in particular, to prevent the removal of water in bulk from major drainage basins in Canada". This bill has three components: first, the prohibition of the removal of water in bulk; second, the exceptions to this prohibition, for example, water that is removed for bottling and for producing beverages for commercial purposes, and water that is removed and used on a short-term basis, for example, for emergency situations or humanitarian purposes; and third, the enforcement provisions.

Canada has a large quantity of the planet's fresh water. It is true that this is a great resource and we must protect it and ensure that it is distributed fairly and equitably. It is a natural treasure that must never be taken for granted.

Water is vital to human health and life. In Canada, we do not have a national strategy to respond to urgent problems and, unfortunately, the Conservatives are not providing any federal leadership in terms of conserving and protecting our water. I hope that the Conservatives will do something about this situation soon and that, like us, they will vote in favour of this bill, which the hon. member has

courageously introduced a number of times in order to protect Canada's water. It is a resource that we must not neglect.

The federal water policy is over 20 years old. It is very outdated, and this situation must quickly be remedied. We are facing more and more challenges with regard to our water supply, including contamination, shortage and pressure to export our water to the United States by pipeline or water diversion, for example. Other hon. members spoke about this at length earlier. I am wondering what the Conservatives are waiting for to take action. This is really urgent. Imagine if there were a pipeline allowing our water to be exported directly to the United States. It would be absolutely terrible.

The NDP is in favour of introducing a national water policy. It is an important and noteworthy undertaking.

Let us look at a bit of history. NAFTA has long been regarded as a threat to Canada's sovereignty over water. In 1999, following a debate, the House of Commons adopted an NDP motion to place an immediate moratorium on bulk water exports and interbasin transfers. The motion also asked the government to "introduce legislation to prohibit bulk freshwater exports and interbasin transfers and not be a party to any international agreement that compels us to export freshwater against our will...". Unfortunately, nothing has been done since that motion was adopted in the House of Commons.

In June 2007, the House passed another motion from the NDP—which is very proactive when it comes to protecting water—asking the government to begin talks with its American counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA. And what did the Conservatives do? Nothing.

En 2010, the Conservative government tried something, but it was not enough and it was inadequate. It introduced Bill C-26, which sought to ban bulk water removals. However, this bill had a number of flaws, including a major one. Indeed, under that legislation, 80%—that is right—of surface waters in Canada were not protected, because the protection only applied to transboundary waters. It makes no sense at all to think that this tiny bill, this tiny measure could have a real impact on the export of Canada's fresh water in bulk.

● (1745)

This legislation paved the way for the construction of water pipelines, such as the one proposed in the 1990s, which did not make any sense. That is utterly shameful. That is Conservative inaction. That is a lack of action in this area.

Currently, there are growing water shortages all over the world. As I said, the NDP has always asked that bulk water exports be banned. This is a critical component of a national water policy, which does not exist in Canada, but which could set standards for clean drinking water, which could also provide strict environmental protection measures for water resources, and which could recognize water as a common right. It is really important to recognize water as a common right. So, this is a good plan and it is a plan proposed by the NDP.

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As we said, water is essential to life, but it is not an infinite resource, far from it. Even in Canada, which is rich in water—and hon. members may not know that, but I am going to tell them—one quarter of Canadian municipalities have faced water shortages. That is a real concern. One third of them depend on groundwater, on which we currently have very little information, to meet daily needs. A national water policy must create a comprehensive conservation strategy and invest in research and in the monitoring of that resource.

I am going to talk a little about my riding of Drummond, where people are really concerned and have expressed grave misgivings about water. Three municipalities in my riding face water problems, whether in terms of quality or quantity. The municipalities of Saint-Germain-de-Grantham, Saint-Majorique-de-Grantham, and Saint-Cyrille-de-Wendover are well aware of the importance of access to quality water in sufficient quantities. Every time that I visit these municipalities, the residents regularly ask me when the water problems are going to be addressed. I am currently lobbying for a national water policy to be a key priority in Canada, so that such problems do not recur in my riding's municipalities, or elsewhere in Canada. Two of these municipalities are currently entering into an agreement with the city of Drummondville. I am really happy about that. It is good news, but it is not enough. There are still problems in the municipality of Saint-Cyrille-de-Wendover, and the federal government must have a policy to help these municipalities.

There are other concerns regarding water in my municipality and the millions of litres of water necessary for the hydraulic fracturing of shale gas. This is currently the subject of a major debate in my riding, and I initiated a Canada wide petition to protect our water from the shale gas industry.

Six hundred shale gas wells in Quebec would consume the annual equivalent in water of 360,000 Olympic swimming pools. An Olympic swimming pool contains 20,000 litres of beautiful clean water. This water would be mixed with the equivalent of 900 Olympic swimming pools of chemicals. You can imagine the slop, the chemical laden mud, the dreadful, soupy mix that we would end up with, when we really need beautiful clean water.

The Ministry of Sustainable Development, Environment and Parks of Quebec stated in a report that there would be a shortage of underground water in a section where wells would be required to mine shale gas, and that there would not be enough water to meet all the needs. At some point, the choice has to be made between the public and the shale gas industry.

I am going to conclude by saying that water must be a human right. Moreover, on July 28, 2010, the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favour of the human right to water and to sanitary facilities, and for this to be an essential right to the survival of human beings.

• (1750)

In closing, it is truly important for my riding of Drummond that we vote in favour of my colleague's bill, and that we go still further and develop a national water policy that protects our municipalities, so that we can be sure that they have quality water in sufficient quantities.

• (1755)

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today to Bill C-267, a bill to promote the sustainable and mindful use of water in Canada, and more particularly to prevent the removal of water in bulk from Canada's major drainage basins. To begin, I would note that we support the bill in principle and we believe it will be possible to remedy certain flaws in the bill in committee.

Canada has the most abundant freshwater resources in the world. It is estimated that 8% of the world's freshwater reserves are concentrated in Canada. That abundance prompts some people to advocate exporting it to the southwestern United States. In 2008, for example, members of the Montreal Economic Institute proposed that Quebec export 10% of its renewable freshwater in return for \$6.5 billion per year. That is simply irresponsible.

In order to measure how lucky we are, we have to consider that the planet's water stocks are 97% saltwater. The remaining 3% are virtually inaccessible, because they are locked in the polar icecaps, in glaciers or in deep water. In total, it is estimated that less than 1% of water stocks exist in the form of accessible freshwater. We must therefore manage this resource wisely. It is our duty to humanity, somewhat as Brazilians must manage the Amazon rainforest, which is described as the lungs of our planet.

This bill has been made necessary by the fact that NAFTA apparently does not adequately protect Canada's sovereignty over its water resources. Even though the governments of Canada, the United States and Mexico jointly declared in 1994 that NAFTA did not apply to water in its natural state, some people believe that surface water and underground water in their natural state are subject to NAFTA obligations and water could therefore be commercialized.

So the critics' concerns have not been assuaged by the statements made by the three trading partners. It must be said that, were it not for the vigilance of civil society, certain bulk water export projects might well have materialized. I am thinking in particular of the Nova Group project, which in 1998 obtained authorization from the Ontario government to export 600 million litres of water per year from Lake Superior. People on both sides of the border had to mobilize to get the Ontario government to back down.

I remind you that, in an attempt to correct the problem, in February 1999 the House of Commons adopted an NDP motion to impose a moratorium on the export of bulk freshwater shipments and inter-basin transfers.

The motion also called for the government, and I quote, to "introduce legislation to prohibit bulk freshwater exports and inter-basin transfers and"... "not be a party to any international agreement that would compel us to export water against our will..."

The Liberal government subsequently announced that it would consult the provinces and territories in order to develop a strategy that would prohibit the bulk removal of water from Canadian drainage basins for domestic purposes or for export. However the strategy did not address the trade issues raised by NAFTA and focused mainly on water management.

In June 2007, again on the initiative of the NDP, the House adopted a motion calling for the government to initiate talks with our southern neighbours to have water excluded from the scope of NAFTA. The Conservatives, like the previous Liberal government, did nothing. This was a great surprise.

In 2010, the Conservative government did in fact table Bill C-26 to ban the bulk removal of water, but the bill died on the order paper because of its many deficiencies. The Conservatives' bill addressed only a small portion of fresh water, for it left 80% of Canadian surface water unprotected, as the prohibition applied to transboundary waters only.

Nothing in that bill would have banned the construction of pipelines and other forms of exploitation of bulk water by truck or ship, for example. We have long been calling for the prohibition of bulk water exports, and view this as a key element of a national water policy which would establish standards for safe, potable water and solid environmental protection measures for Canada's water resources.

• (1800)

We support the principle of the bill before us, but are critical of some of these flaws which, with a little goodwill, could be corrected in committee.

For example, we note that there is no guidance to the governor in council as to the definition of what constitutes a major drainage basin, in the regulations. In our opinion, the effectiveness or strength of this bill depends on that definition. If the definition adopted by the government includes none of the major drainage basins, the bill might then be considered inapplicable.

We note as well that Bill C-267 grants the government very wide regulatory powers, including the capacity to redefine the scope of the exceptions and to establish new exceptions by regulation. These powers seem disproportionate, and could lead the government to exercise them as a way to rewrite the act. As we know, faced with a government that is environmentally delinquent, it is best to be prudent and to set clear limits on its regulatory power.

We understand that the prohibitions are limited to the bulk removal of water from major basins through diversion. We shall attempt in committee to ensure that bulk exports by truck or ship are also prohibited.

My last observation is on the issue of bottled water. The bill creates an exception for manufactured products such as bottled water and beverages. This is a major loophole. We believe this issue needs very close review in committee.

I would like to take advantage of the time I have been given to speak to the bigger issue. Instead of thinking about exporting water, I believe we need to be thinking about our habits in order to reduce the pressure to commercialize water. For example, we know that 70% of

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the fresh water consumed is used in agriculture. That number may not decrease, considering that the governments of Canada and the United States are encouraging corn crops for the production of fuel. It is the same thing for extracting oil from the oil sands. It is estimated that two to five barrels of fresh water are needed to extract just one barrel of oil. That does not even include the water contaminated by the so-called holding ponds.

More than ever, we need to become aware of our dependence on non-renewable energies and their effects on our environment and the depletion of fresh water. Although this government is determined to drive out those it calls environmental radicals, one day it will have to take into account the effects of climate change on the environment and Canada's water resources. Instead of cutting science budgets, the government should be investing in research in order to study types of drought and meteorological changes and to ensure that our water resources policy takes these things into account.

In closing, I would like to commend the associations, unions, NGOs, citizens and local authorities around the world who are gathering next week in Marseilles for the Alternative World Water Forum in order to discuss the various challenges of water management. Like them, I hope governments the world over, starting with the Canadian government, will work on better protecting our water resources. We have to ensure that water is recognized as a fundamental human right and as a public good, to be protected from corporations that far too often pollute it or exploit it for profit.

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): There being no members rising on debate, I would invite the hon. member for Lac-Saint-Louis for his five minute right of reply.

• (1805)

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government's opposition to Bill C-267 is puzzling because it amounts to a reversal of its previous public commitments on the issue.

In the 2008 election campaign the Conservatives said that they agreed with the principle of a federal ban on bulk water exports through a prohibition on interbasin transfers of water within Canada. This was in response to the then recently published recommendations of the Canadian Water Issues Council working in collaboration with the program on water issues at the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto. These recommendations were incorporated in the earlier version of Bill C-267, which I introduced in the House of Commons prior to that election.

In the November 2008 throne speech which immediately followed the election, the government clearly committed to introducing legislation like Bill C-267. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment said in her speech that water is a resource and as such it is a matter of provincial jurisdiction.

Water is not a resource like any other. Water is not oil or copper or nickel, resources that are locked in the ground and not part and parcel of living ecosystems. Oil may be the lifeblood of the economy, but it is far from the lifeblood of the environment.

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What is more, natural resources like oil are static. In their natural state they do not move across provincial and international boundaries, either above ground in rivers or underground in aquifers like water does. If they did, they might likely have been designated a shared federal-provincial responsibility, or even an exclusive federal jurisdiction in the manner of another well-known resource that moves freely through Canada's natural environment without regard for political borders, namely fish.

My colleague also said that there is no constitutional justification or rationale for federal "incursion" into the matter of prohibiting bulk water exports, that for example, the federal role does not accrue in this case under the federal residual power of peace, order and good government. However, it is not necessary to invoke this residual power to justify a federal role in limiting water transfers and exports.

If the federal government has the power to prohibit activities harmful to the environment, such as pollution, it is not because it was granted this power under a Canadian Constitution that predates the word "environmentalism", nor is it because of the federal residual power of peace, order and good government. Rather, it is because the court has ruled that society has evolved and that environmental protection in the political and economic context of the late 20th century is a matter worthy of Criminal Code protection.

I refer the parliamentary secretary to the 1997 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Regina v. Hydro-Québec*, where the utility challenged Ottawa's authority to use an interim order under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act to stop the provincial utility from depositing toxic substances into a watercourse in Quebec. Hydro-Québec argued that Ottawa's interim order could not be justified either by virtue of the federal criminal power or as a matter of national concern under the peace, order and good government residual power in section 91 of the Constitution Act, 1867.

The Supreme Court, however, held that the interim order and its enabling legislation, CEPA, were valid because the protection of the environment is a major challenge of our time that constitutes "a wholly legitimate public objective in the exercise of the criminal law power", and that "the stewardship of the environment is a fundamental value of our society and that Parliament may use its criminal law power to underline that value". I believe the court would view Bill C-267 in very much the same light.

The Supreme Court decision was close, five to four. The dissenters held that Ottawa was not authorized to act in the matter because CEPA's purpose is to regulate, not prohibit, and that regulation is not a matter of criminal law which is normally aimed at prohibiting a deleterious action.

I would submit that Bill C-267 is not intended to regulate water removal but rather to prohibit it outright. This legislation would pass muster at the Supreme Court. In any event, the intent behind the bill is to have Ottawa engage and work with the provinces to make the current national consensus against bulk water exports watertight into the future.

In conclusion, Canadians want a government of courage and character prepared to assume federal leadership when it counts. They do not want a federal government that shrinks from involvement

with the provinces on matters of profound national concern, like Canada's water sovereignty and security.

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

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): In my opinion the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Pursuant to Standing Order 93, the division stands deferred until Wednesday, March 14, 2012, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

• (1810)

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Mr. Speaker, if you seek it, I believe you would find consent to see the clock as 6:30 p.m.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Is there unanimous consent to see the clock as 6:30 p.m.?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*Translation*]

NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the coastal communities of the five provinces bordering the Gulf of St. Lawrence are concerned about this government's lack of commitment regarding the responsible management of natural resources. Their concern seems justified.

The Canada-Newfoundland Offshore Petroleum Board recently rejected an application from the young oil company Corridor Resources to suspend its drilling permit.

While I applaud the board's decision, I am concerned about the arguments presented by Corridor Resources for the suspension of its permit. The oil company is experiencing financial difficulties. The Gulf of St. Lawrence's ecosystem supports all bordering coastal communities. How is it that a young oil company is authorized to conduct operations in such a fragile area, without adequate financial resources to do so?

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I note that the department has approved a Corridor Resources application for a two-year extension of its drilling activities in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and allowed it to dispense with the deposit of a \$1 million guarantee. This means that the drilling permit of that oil company was renewed with a two-year rent break, which amounts to \$750,000. Normally, that \$750,000 would have been paid to the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. Instead, it will stay in the pockets of an oil company, even if it ends up making a fortune in the gulf.

Is that the government's idea of responsible development, to give money back to oil companies? And what about the very real concerns of Canadians in the five provinces bordering the gulf? It seems to me the department is prepared to deliver permits to any drilling company, regardless of its financial stability.

The government's eagerness to give presents to oil companies does not inspire confidence among Canadians living in the gulf's coastal communities, and nor does its refusal to create an environmental assessment panel, as requested by the board and by Canadians living in the gulf's coastal communities. Even the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers supports the establishment of a federal panel.

Since last summer, the board has had to change its way of assessing the environmental impact of the drilling project several times. The board, which only has the authority to monitor oil and gas development in Newfoundland and Labrador, does not have the power or the resources to deal with our concerns. That does not make sense: the Conservatives seem to show a lack of respect by giving the board such an important mandate without all the necessary powers.

Once again, I am asking the government to establish an environmental assessment panel with the necessary powers to evaluate the impact of all oil and gas development in the gulf. The establishment of this federal panel would reassure Canadians living around the gulf. This is long overdue. We have been asking for it for months now, and we are asking for it again today. I hope the department will agree to this request.

• (1815)

[English]

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, as the member across has said, things have changed since he asked his question, so we certainly want to deal with the questions that are relevant to the present.

I thank the hon. member for asking about the next steps involved in the review of the Old Harry project in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Our government is strongly committed to ensuring the safe, responsible and sustainable development of Canada's natural resources. We recognize the importance of the Gulf of St. Lawrence to all Canadians. We also understand that some stakeholders have concerns regarding environmental sensitivities in this region. That is why we rely on arm's-length independent regulatory bodies to make science-based decisions regarding development in Canada's offshore.

Corridor Resources' submission of its environmental assessment report to the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore

Petroleum Board is an important step to ensure that the safety of Canadian workers and the environment will continue to be protected.

The board has undertaken a completeness review of the environmental assessment report. It will also review the drilling application for completeness and for compliance with federal regulations.

I want to assure hon. members that Canadian regulators will not allow any offshore activity unless they are convinced that the environment and the health and safety of workers are being protected.

On January 20 of this year, Corridor Resources requested a prohibition order from the board until the strategic environmental assessment of the Gulf of St. Lawrence could be updated. On February 28, the board announced that it would not be issuing that prohibition order. However, it did indicate that the strategic environmental assessment of the gulf will go forward as planned and the project specific public consultations will recommence only once the SEA has been completed in early 2013.

The hon. member should be happy with the thoroughness of this review. It means that we have an independent regulatory body that is doing its job in the best interests of this country and in the best interests of his constituents. I want to assure him that the environmental review of Old Harry is in fact on track. That is the bottom line.

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, while I am quite happy that workers' protection will be considered by the environmental review that is being proposed, the real problem is that the CNLOPB only has two reasons to do what it is doing: one, it is there to ensure that the workers will be protected against any possible harm; or two, that there are serious environmental concerns.

There are no workers at the Old Harry site. I do not see how doing what the government is proposing could possibly help workers who simply do not exist. They have not been hired yet. There is nothing there. There is not even exploration that is occurring at this point.

The only thing left for the CNLOPB at this point is to have invoked its own articles and struck this environmental review based on serious environmental concern. I am pleased that the government is actually admitting to the fact that there are serious environmental concerns that must be addressed but they will not be addressed by what is being proposed.

The only real way to address this is to ask the experts. That is why the Environmental Assessment Act actually proposes a serious, credible system to deal with the problems in Old Harry. The problem is to have the commission struck by the environment minister.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Speaker, in some ways the member opposite answers his own question. Our government does take the sustainable development of Canada's natural resources very seriously. He understands that and that is why the proposed Old Harry project in the Gulf of St. Lawrence is undergoing a thorough and transparent environmental assessment. Most projects of this magnitude do that.

Adjournment Proceedings

The health and safety of Canadians, as he has pointed out, and the protection of the environment are important to our government. The environmental assessment report submitted to the board by Corridor Resources Inc. is part of the environmental screening process that ensures the protection of both workers and the environment.

I would like to repeat that the board and all Canadian regulators will not allow any offshore activity to occur unless they are certain the environment and the health and safety of workers are being protected.

Once the board has updated its strategic environmental assessment, public consultations on the project specific environmental assessment of Old Harry will resume.

The environmental review is on track and that is good news for everyone and good news for all of Canada.

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the availability of the parliamentary secretary at this late hour to respond to my further questions on this matter.

I put a question to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development on February 27 that related to the interim report issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada several weeks ago. Regrettably, the response by the minister dealt with the original mandate for the commission and actions taken, to the credit of the government, to this point in time. I will put the question again to this House and I would appreciate an elaboration on any thought that the government has given to the interim report issued by the commission.

Most profoundly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada drew a very strong and powerful conclusion that residential schools constituted an assault on aboriginal children, families, culture, self-governing and self-sustaining aboriginal nations and that the impact has been ongoing for some time.

I know the minister has commended the commission for its work and I know all members of this House and all Canadians would want to step forward and commend the commission for its work. Having had the opportunity to participate, even indirectly, in some of these sessions at the Assembly of First Nations Conference on Justice and having witnessed the testimony of some of the first nations that are trying to recover from their experience at residential schools, we owe a profound thanks to the commission for conducting this work and doing it in a very sincere and caring way. I know all Canadians look forward to the eventual report that it will issue.

The commission was mandated to look into the harm suffered by residents in the residential schools, to come forward with a plan for compensation, to deliver that compensation and to provide a report to the government. However, the commission, in its thoughtfulness, has come forward with an interim report that puts forward some very interesting and helpful recommendations on a number of matters that have been talked about in this House many times, such as the availability of resources for healing, and health and education for first nations peoples. I will touch on a couple of those.

The commission, in its interim report, recommended the need for the federal government to invest in high quality mental health and

cultural support services into the long term. It also interestingly recommended that there be a review of curriculum materials for non-aboriginal students so that we can ensure that all Canadians have a full understanding of the trauma that our first nations friends and neighbours suffered through.

It also recommended that the government turn to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to move forward on its reconciliation activities. As well, it called for the restoration of funds in the coming budget to the National Healing Foundation.

I look forward to the response by the Government of Canada to these recommendations put forward by the commission.

• (1820)

Mr. Greg Rickford (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first I would like to say that while I may not always agree with the member on a number of points, I appreciate the enthusiasm and the passion with which she brings these forward, not just in this place but also in the important work we do in our committee and of course in forums like this where we have a chance to talk a little more extensively on certain issues.

I am also pleased to have this opportunity to speak with respect to truth and reconciliation on the bigger issue of Indian residential schools. As a former signatory and legal counsel to that process prior to my political life and from serving constituents in the great Kenora riding, I can assure the member and members of this place that I am well versed on this and happy to make representations on it.

Aboriginal and treaty rights are protected in Canada through a unique framework. These rights are enshrined in our Constitution, including our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and are complemented by practical policies to adapt our evolving reality. This framework will continue to be the cornerstone of our efforts to promote and protect the rights of aboriginal Canadians.

More than a year ago Canada endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, illustrating our government's commitment to reconciliation and renewed relationships that are based on good faith, partnership and mutual respect. This endorsement offered an opportunity to strengthen relations with first nations, Inuit and Métis people in Canada, and to support Canada's ongoing work on indigenous issues internationally.

As always, we will continue to make strides in the reconciliation and fulfillment of aboriginal rights through negotiation of modern treaties and the settlement of specific claims.

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I would also like to reiterate that through the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, a court approved settlement, the Government of Canada provided \$60 million for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to carry out its important mandate. The commission released its interim report on February 24, as is known to this place, and our government will now take the time to review the report and consider its recommendations.

We are committed to supporting former residential school students and their families throughout the implementation of the settlement agreement, including providing access to important mental health and emotional support services. To date, 97% of the 80,000 originally estimated living former students have received their common experience payment compensation, totalling over \$1.6 billion. Over 14,000 independent assessment process claims have been heard or settled through negotiations, totalling \$1.3 billion.

On January 16, the Government of Canada announced that the advocacy and public information program will allocate \$3 million in 2012 and 2013, bringing its total funding over the last six years to more than \$25 million. This program began in 2007 and encourages the sharing of information to ensure that aboriginal communities, particularly former students and their families, are aware of all aspects of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement and its potential impacts.

The goals of the 2012 to 2013 funding are to support healing and reconciliation, with a particular emphasis on youth and intergenerational issues; to promote a better understanding of the impacts of the legacy of Indian residential schools; and to build new partnerships between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people.

Clearly, our government will continue to work with our partners and other countries for the advancement of the cause of indigenous rights around the world, and we will continue to live up to the terms of that court approved settlement and our commitment to truth and reconciliation.

• (1825)

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. parliamentary secretary for his response, but I would appreciate a response to my very specific question.

As the parliamentary secretary is aware, when that agreement and the sums of dollars to be paid out in compensation were assessed, there was an underestimation of the number of claimants who would come forward. Since then, the number has almost doubled.

In addition to that, as I mentioned, the commission has recommended a number of additional areas where funding should be provided, including to educate non-aboriginal people in the trauma that aboriginal Canadians suffered in the schools. More specifically, it has recommended very particularly that the funding be restored for the healing centres. I wonder if the member could address those questions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Rickford: Mr. Speaker, clearly our government is taking action on addressing the concerns of first nations on human rights issues.

The Government of Canada is committed to a fair and lasting resolution to the legacy of Indian residential schools and we are committed to supporting reconciliation among aboriginal people who attended these schools, their families and communities, and all Canadians.

As the Prime Minister noted in the 2008 apology, the knowledge of our shared history is an important basis for a new relationship with aboriginal people.

Our government is committed to supporting former residential school students and their families throughout the implementation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, including providing access to important mental health and emotional support services.

Bringing closure to the legacy of Indian residential schools lies at the heart of reconciliation and the renewal of the relationship between aboriginal people and all Canadians.

BORDER CROSSINGS

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was very surprised to hear the reply by the Minister of Public Safety to the question I asked in this House on November 18. My question was simple:

...under the pretext of cutting costs, the government is penalizing our region. While the economy remains fragile, the government's measures are harmful to farmers, tourists, emergency services that have cross-border reciprocal agreements, and all of the families that feel torn apart by these service reductions.

Will the government commit to reopening the border crossings that have been closed and returning the others to their former hours of operation?

Unfortunately, the minister's reply had nothing to do with my question. Instead, he used this exchange to criticize the political party to which I belong. Therefore, I will again ask my question in the House today.

Let me point out to the minister, who accuses the NDP of shutting down the Canadian economy, that the Canada Border Service Agency's decision to reduce the hours of operation of the three border crossings in my riding has directly paralyzed the economy of my riding and, indirectly, that of Canada. In my riding, the border crossings of Morse's Line in St. Armand, East Pinnacle in Frelighsburg, and Glen Sutton in Sutton are affected.

The impact of these cuts to a public service is major. They affect the economy of border communities because they interfere with the flow of goods, services and people. Since these measures were implemented on April 1, 2011, they have had a negative effect on my riding's economic vitality.

People can no longer move about freely. Many American tourists like coming to discover and visit communities in my riding. When border crossings are open only from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., people cannot spend the whole day in our region. Families are also suffering because of this change. Many people in my riding have family members in the United States, and shorter business hours at border crossings mean that they see their loved ones less frequently.

Adjournment Proceedings

Service cuts have also reduced the flow of goods and services. This is a problem for farmers and firefighters on both sides of the border, who have agreements to respond to emergencies on both Canadian and American soil. These measures also hinder socio-economic development and are crippling my riding.

In conclusion, I hope that tonight, I will get an answer to the question I asked on November 18.

• (1830)

[English]

Ms. Candice Hoepfner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as my hon. colleague is well aware, there are approximately 7,300 uniformed officers who clear over 90 million travellers and process over 13 million commercial releases each year in Canada. I can assure the member that our government is focused on ensuring our border is secure while easing the flow of legitimate travel and trade.

We are doing this through initiatives such as the action plan on perimeter security and economic competitiveness and the action plan on regulatory co-operation. These were both announced by our Prime Minister and President Obama in December of last year. As the Prime Minister said:

We are pursuing an ambitious global trade agenda while at the same time ensuring enhanced access to the United States, our largest and most important trading partner. Together, these agreements represent the most significant step forward in Canada-U.S. cooperation since the North American Free Trade Agreement.

These action plans are a step in the right direction.

Let me assure the member opposite that we have not stopped there. We are also investing in border infrastructure including new lanes at the busiest crossings. We cannot forget that the CBSA must ensure that people and goods are cleared as quickly as possible, without compromising the safety and security of Canadians. I also would like to remind the House that we are accountable to taxpayers. We must ensure that operations are carried out in a cost-effective and responsible manner. That is why it is important for my hon. colleague to understand the actions taken by the CBSA.

With that in mind, I would like to set the record straight about the statement made by the hon. member for Brome—Missisquoi about the reduction of hours at three border crossings in his riding. At East Pinnacle, for example, border operations were reduced by eight hours. This port of entry now closes at 4 p.m. instead of midnight. There is a 24/7 port of entry only 10 kilometres away. With only 58 travellers per day, reducing the hours made good sense. The second port of entry in question is Glen Sutton. This port of entry processed 37 people a day. I am sure even my hon. colleague would have a hard time justifying a 24/7 port of entry for only 37 people per day. Since the port of entry down the road, 11.5 kilometres away, also has 24/7 service, it was clear that reducing the hours to 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. was more realistic and operationally sound. The last port of entry that reduced its hours is Morses Line. This port of entry is now open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. for the 84 travellers who use it daily. After

4 p.m., travellers proceed to Saint Armand—Phillipsburg 13 kilometres away where service is provided 24/7.

The rationale for the decisions to reduce hours at ports of entry is to ensure that operations are not only cost effective but also as efficient as possible. These are difficult decisions, but they make sense. The CBSA was able to do this while keeping its mandate intact and still providing excellent service by dedicated professionals. This is good border management which the government expects and Canadians deserve.

• (1835)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Mr. Speaker, while the government claims to be helping Canada prosper, it is in fact stifling development in my region. It is killing jobs in ridings targeted by these cuts to border services. Border communities have been developing relationships and agreements for decades now. These measures really jeopardize all that work. Whether we are talking about 58 people, 37 people or 84 people, that is not a significant amount in a budget, but for a small community, that is a huge number of people who will have lower levels of service. These measures will jeopardize what we have spent the last few decades trying to develop. People's quality of life and their safety will be seriously affected, yet the savings will be minimal.

When will the government restore normal hours of operation? I am asking the question again. When will the government give the communities in question the means to continue to grow normally, so that no one is left behind?

[English]

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Mr. Speaker, the facts really do speak for themselves. When travel volumes do not support long hours at border crossings, they need to be examined. If appropriate, changes need to be made. This is reasonable.

I can assure members these were sound decisions that were made through tight fiscal management and the pursuit of a sound strategic agenda. They were made in a way that enables the CBSA to still meet the needs of the surrounding community without compromising security. Security was not compromised, jobs were not lost and taxpayer dollars are being better spent. I know the CBSA will continue to provide the kind of service at the border that Canadians have grown to expect and deserve, keeping travel and trade flowing while ensuring safety and security.

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:38 p.m.)

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