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Ms. Anita Neville

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Tuesday, June 21, 2005

• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.)):
Good afternoon, everybody. I think it's 3:30 p.m. by all of our watches, so we can begin.

I would like to welcome Florence Ievers here today, pursuant to Standing Orders 110 and 111. The certificate of nomination of Ms. Ievers was referred to this committee on June 17.

I welcome you here. I know you have prepared a short presentation, and then we'll open it up, as you're well aware of the format here and the custom of committee members to ask questions. We'll just do it in our traditional manner.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Florence Ievers (Coordinator, Status of Women Canada):
Thank you very much, Madam Chair. It's a pleasure for me to be here once again. I think it's my ninth time before the committee, and I feel I know you and you know me quite well. This time it's a particular honour to be here because I'm here on the occasion of my suggested reappointment as coordinator of Status of Women Canada, the government agency that is there to promote gender equality and the full participation of women. Your committee has been extremely instrumental in bringing gender equality issues to the fore.

[Translation]

Your committee surpassed the highest expectations by raising the bar in the area of equality research and by playing a key role in insuring gender equality remains at the forefront of our considerations, within government as well as outside of government. I commend you on your work, and I am delighted to have an opportunity to continue to work with you over the next two years.

I have spent many years working on promoting gender equality and fundamental rights for women, and I feel qualified to discharge the duties of my position over the next two years, that of coordinator of Status of Women Canada.

[English]

As some of you may know, I bring a rather passionate commitment to gender equality and women's representation, and I have a background and education that have led me here. I've worked for a number of years in the public service, both at the federal and provincial levels. I also have experience in the private sector; I'm a lawyer by profession. I practised law in Quebec City many years ago before embarking on my public service career. I have been the coordinator of Status of Women Canada since 1997.

Over the years I've led the agency through some tremendous challenges and accomplishments and some significant changes, supported by a really strong team of public servants and ministers who had the vision to guide us through the issues we needed to go through. For example, we've gone through Beijing plus 5 and Beijing plus 10, which were two very important milestones. Some of you were at the Beijing plus 10 commission in New York very recently. I also had the honour of presenting Canada's report to the CIDA committee in 2003. These milestones underscore the success and the progress we've made on gender equality since the first world conference of the United Nations in Mexico in 1975. It also reminds us—especially the CIDA committee presentation—that we still have a way to go. For example, building on the federal plan for gender equality that existed and that has been in force since 1995, and on the agenda for gender equality, which has been the government strategy for 2000 to 2005, we're now working on developing the new gender equality strategy to take us through the next stages of the work ahead.

[Translation]

We have designed and implemented gender-based analysis, an important policy development tool. I have been following with great interest the work of your committee, have read your report on gender-based analysis and on the progress that has been made—sometimes very little progress—as well as on the progress that could be made if we were to work at it more effectively. I think it is an essential aspect of any new government strategy.

[English]

In the last number of years at Status of Women Canada we have seen Canada's reputation gain momentum as a leader in gender equality around the world. We're now at a juncture where if we're not careful, if we don't give ourselves a very good plan to move forward in the next five years, we risk regressing a little. I am honoured to have been called upon to lead Status of Women Canada since 1997, and I feel it's especially an honour to be asked to do so for the next two years.

In my view, we're at a special juncture. We've worked hard, we've learned from our experience, but with the work of your committee and with the work of Status of Women, and with a commitment from many circles, I think we're now ready to move on and to have a much more effective way of working in order to advance gender equality in Canada. I look forward to putting my energies and my efforts towards that in the next two years.

•(1535)

[Translation]

I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Ievers.

We'll begin with the Conservatives.

Ms. Helena Guergis (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you, Ms. Ievers, for being here today.

I've had a chance to look at your bio, and it certainly is an impressive background. I can't recall if I've been in front of you before or not yet—perhaps in the last year.

I see that you worked for the Liberals quite a bit and you were appointed to your current position by Prime Minister Chrétien.

Ms. Florence Ievers: I was, yes.

Ms. Helena Guergis: One of the mandates of your department is to advance women's human rights. Can you tell us a little bit about where you think Canadian women may be lacking in human rights?

Ms. Florence Ievers: I'd like to come to your first point. You did say I had done a lot of work for governments. I would like to point out that I'm a public servant. I won a competition in the public service in 1988 when I became assistant secretary, intergovernmental affairs, in the then existing federal-provincial relations office, so a lot of my background is really in intergovernmental affairs as well.

In Canada we're very fortunate that we have in our Constitution some very strong dispositions that confer equality and a number of other rights on all Canadians. However, there are some pockets of our population who are less fortunate and have greater difficulty in achieving their full human rights. I can give you the example of aboriginal women, for instance, who have difficulty in that regard. That was pointed out to Canada when we presented our report to the United Nations CEDAW committee. I can think of immigrant women, who have a greater difficulty in integrating themselves in society. There are a number of poor people in Canada who have greater difficulty in gaining full benefits and full knowledge at times of the rights they are entitled to in Canada.

I would say those who are in greatest need of special attention are perhaps the aboriginal women I mentioned and some pockets of women who are doubly and triply disadvantaged. As you know, there are some women who face disadvantage because they're women, but also because of other things as well.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Why do you think the federal government has failed to take necessary action to give aboriginal women their rights under the charter?

Ms. Florence Ievers: I think the government has taken steps over time to improve the rights of aboriginal women. A number of the situations that pertain to aboriginal women are just coming to the fore now; I think of the Sisters In Spirit initiative. For a long time a number of aboriginal women went missing and not very many people paid very much attention to it. Now, with the help of non-governmental organizations, the government has partnered with

aboriginal women's organizations to ensure those abuses and those situations no longer continue.

Aboriginal women have been excluded, if I may say so, from the governance of a lot of their local and band situations. I think also, with matrimonial property laws, they don't benefit from the same rights and they can't benefit from the same advantages as other women in Canada, but I think over time the government has taken steps to improve that.

Currently this is certainly an issue Status of Women Canada is taking. That's one of our two key priorities, ensuring that aboriginal women have the full benefits of their rights and become economically independent and free from violence.

•(1540)

Ms. Helena Guergis: Could you maybe clarify a little bit more the steps you feel the government has taken over the years?

Ms. Florence Ievers: Well, the government has worked with a number of aboriginal organizations. I've looked at the report on aboriginal peoples that shed light on the whole situation. I see that women have recently been included in the round tables the government has put together in order to advance aboriginal issues. I was pleased that at the recent cabinet retreat the government had with aboriginal people, women were very much part of the process. This is not something we used to see five or ten years ago.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Later today I hope to have the opportunity to present a motion to my colleagues at the committee to address the housing rights of aboriginal women. I have to admit that I was shocked—as I'm sure everyone around the table was—to hear that some women on reserves are put out of the situation they're in when their marriage ends or their spouse dies.

I spoke with a group of Pathfinders back home, and they'll be very pleased to see that I'm putting this motion forward, because they had some great concern. They had a skit they put together on the Famous Five. Then we talked about women's rights and issues. They asked how far have we come, and I explained to them that aboriginal women still have this issue. They'll be very pleased to see that I'm doing this today.

Really, it troubles me. Previous committees, human rights, even the Senate committees—they've all done reports. It's not news. I know you worked with the Liberals, and I'm not trying to put you on the spot—

The Chair: Ms. Torsney.

Hon. Paddy Torsney (Burlington, Lib.): The people in our public service do not work for the Liberals or the Conservatives or the Bloc or the NDP; they work for the people of Canada. A senior public servant is not an instrument of any political party, and it's completely inappropriate for the member opposite to continue to portray her in this way.

Ms. Helena Guergis: What am I portraying?

The Chair: Ms. Guergis, we have another point of order.

Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): My understanding is that the point of having Ms. Ievers here is to talk about leadership at Status of Women. We're really talking about the direction of Status of Women Canada under Ms. Ievers' leadership.

The Chair: That's the agenda.

Ms. Guergis.

Ms. Helena Guergis: I just wanted to ask you why you think the Liberal government has failed to enforce the charter.

The Chair: I'm going to rule that question out of order. Your time is up.

Madam Brunelle.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to see you again. I took a look at your biographical notes, and because I have met with you on several occasions, I'd like to raise the bar and address the problems we are grappling with as women. This brand new committee gives us an opportunity to see that some women are seriously suffering from poverty and violence and therefore need basic resources. Moreover, last week, we once again heard that discrimination exists in the workplace. We have managed to make sure that women get an education and become professionals, but discrimination in the higher echelons remains.

I would like to believe—and I doubt I am the only one—that over the next 10 years, the future will belong to women, and I believe the work/family balance will be an important issue for women in the workforce; but we should not forget women who are victims of poverty and violence.

How do you see this situation? I know that you cannot solve every Canadian woman's problems, but how does Status of Women Canada see things? How can Status of Women Canada advance these issues over the coming years?

Ms. Florence Ievers: I will answer your question on the future by getting back to the past.

The work and family balance issue is one Status of Women Canada has been working on a great deal, in concert with other departments, because Status of Women Canada does not act alone in policy areas. We have already mentioned it, and we are there to offer advice and support, and sometimes to denounce discrimination cases. Also, the parental leave issue was a big part of this work, because women were doing most of the unpaid work. This situation is ongoing, but it has improved: fathers are taking on more responsibilities. Moreover, some policies, such as those relating to day care, have improved the situation.

You mentioned poverty and violence; unfortunately, these two problems often go hand in hand. Status of Women Canada has set itself the objectives of working to ensure accountability and to have the best possible plan over the coming years. Moreover, our chief target is poverty among women in general and aboriginal women more specifically, because these are very vulnerable groups.

We are going to be working with our colleagues from other departments in order to find solutions to these problems. However, poverty is not something that can be dealt with easily because it does not fall within the purview of strictly one department or agency. The

solutions to this problem involve a whole government approach, and even involve the entire federation. The same is true for violence: there is no one department responsible for eliminating violence.

Several provinces have been trying to deal with these problems. We want to have a plan based on an assessment of the gains achieved by women in Canada but also of the existing gaps. I am convinced statistics will clearly demonstrate that there still is a great deal of work to be done to fight poverty and violence.

With a proper diagnosis, we will be able to work more effectively with departments in order to find solutions. I do not think there is a silver bullet. That would be just too easy, but we must work together to mitigate the effect of these scourges.

I also expect to continue to receive your committee's reports; these reports have already laid out possible avenues to settle a number of issues. I think your committee did a study on access to benefits. I have not yet read your report and I do not know if you tabled it yet, but it will certainly contain possible solutions for the most-disadvantaged women.

Status of Women Canada's approach will focus on several aspects. I mentioned the work of your committee and our work with the rest of government, but these questions are not strictly federal in nature; all the members of the federation are involved. We work on these issues with our colleagues from the provinces and territories in order to improve the situation.

• (1545)

[*English*]

The Chair: Who wants to take the lead on this side, colleagues?

Hon. Sarmite Bulte (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Well, I've worked with Madam Ievers for many years.

Ms. Florence Ievers: On the international thing.

Hon. Sarmite Bulte: Internationally as well.

Actually, Ms. Ievers, maybe you could share with the committee the work that has been done at the APEC Women Leaders Network and on the booklet on gender mainstreaming, which you were responsible for, and perhaps advise us as to what the status of it is within APEC and the Women Leaders Network, and also if the AGGI is still alive. I'm sure the members would be interested in the leadership we're taking internationally on this issue.

Ms. Florence Ievers: Yes, APEC is an interesting story. It's an international economic forum in the Asia-Pacific. Canada is a member. Canada used its chairing of the APEC conference many years ago, in 1997, to bring to the fore gender equality issues. If you look at the economy, especially in Asia, you can't look at the equation without also looking at women—women as contributors, very positive contributors to their economies, and also as persons who are less advantaged and need policies that enable them to take better economic leadership.

What the Status of Women Canada did in APEC is we decided that it was very important to look at gender not as a small focal point in APEC, but to have gender become the mainstay of all the committees and all the entities of APEC. To that end we developed a strategy for all the entities of APEC to be engendered. This is still a work in progress. We have worked with the North-South Institute; we've worked with a number of other countries. And we've devised a strategy that has been, to this day, very successful.

This would not have taken hold had it not been for the work of the Women Leaders' Network, which is a forum of business women, academics, and public servants who get together yearly to assess the progress of women in APEC in a number of spheres, whether it's as exporters and participants in enterprises and economies or as workers and citizens of these economies. The work the Women Leaders' Network did with the Gender Focal Point Network was very instrumental in getting APEC gendered, if I may say that. We're quite proud at Status of Women to have worked with CIDA and others, and the Women Leaders' Network, and to have been able to convince leaders of the 23 or 24 economies involved in APEC that gender was a consideration they needed to take into account as they looked at finding solutions to the issues that came to their agenda.

• (1550)

Hon. Sarmite Bulte: Just recently, a number of us were in New York with you at the Beijing plus 10 meeting. What do you see as the outcomes from that meeting, and what do you see as Canada's next steps in what Status of Women can do to move that agenda forward?

Ms. Florence Ievers: All the countries got together to assess success or progress ten years after the Beijing conference. Canada was not alone in being able to say that we had achieved some success, but also coming to the conclusion that we still had a long way to go. The event was useful because it allowed governments to exchange on best practices and learn from each other on the best way to go. Because in Canada we're at the juncture where we need to give ourselves a new strategy for the next five years, the lessons learned in New York were essential to our moving forward. As we build our federal strategy in the next number of months we will be looking to experiences that have been taking place in other countries, for instance, things that have worked, and assessing things that haven't worked so well in order to make advances in gender equality.

We are still a leader in gender equality, but if we don't give ourselves a strategy with appropriate accountability mechanisms, if we don't come to grips with more systematically applying gender-based analysis—and your committee has been very strongly recommending that—if we don't come to grips with poverty and with the situation of aboriginal women, I think when we make our next report to the CIDA committee in 2007 we will have difficulty.

I'm encouraged that I've been asked to continue to do my job, because we're at a juncture now where we can take the leadership with the work of the committee to devise and develop better accountability mechanisms within government, look at governance issues and see if we still have, 30 years after the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, the right apparatus in order to be able to achieve gender equality. You touched on those issues when you did your report on gender-based analysis and when you had discussions with central agencies. I think there is a need not only to move on

issues per se, but also to organize ourselves and devise the right accountability mechanisms so that we can measure progress in the areas where we decide to focus.

• (1555)

Hon. Sarmite Bulte: In your current position, are you able to influence the other departments when you sit at a table? I know the deputy ministers get together. Do you have a seat at the table to ensure that gender-based analysis is conducted in all those departments? How do we ensure that what you are doing is integrated throughout government?

Ms. Florence Ievers: I must say that having been there for almost eight years—it will be eight years in August—I'm less naive than I was when I first came to this position. I've seen the opportunities come and go and the challenges arise.

I'll be candid with you. When we developed the agenda for gender equality in 2000, there were five components to the strategy. Four were the responsibility of Status of Women in collaboration with others. The first was engendering public policy, and we left it to other departments to do that. In hindsight, if I were in 2000 again today, I wouldn't do it that way. I find now that there is an opportunity to make not just Status of Women accountable for moving gender equality, but to make all of government accountable for moving gender equality.

That's why your report was so interesting. Your exchanges with central agencies need to be part and parcel of moving a horizontal initiative forward. It's next to impossible to move a horizontal initiative forward in government without the help of central agencies, so the work of your committee has been extremely helpful.

Is it hard for Status of Women, the way we're organized, to do it? Yes and no. It depends on the accountability mechanisms generally. If we were organized in the government to do things properly, I think Status of Women Canada could rise to the occasion.

Can Status of Women Canada be improved? Certainly. Can the accountability in government towards gender equality be improved? Certainly. That's what this new strategy is going to be all about. We will be consulting at the highest levels. We will be looking at governance issues in all spheres as they pertain to Status of Women, but also as they pertain to how the government is organized to advance gender equality. I think of other areas—official languages, or climate change, or other horizontal initiatives. We will look to those experiences as we develop our new strategies to see which is the best way to go, so we don't fall into the pitfalls that perhaps others have fallen into. We will also be looking at how other governments in other countries are organized to successfully advance gender equality.

The Chair: We have to move on to the next question.

Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Let me just ask one question before I get into my other question.

This is a governor in council appointment.

Ms. Florence Ievers: Yes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Who do you report to? I didn't look at the org chart before I came.

Ms. Florence Ievers: I report to the Minister of Canadian Heritage and I am responsible for Status of Women.

Ms. Jean Crowder: So you report directly to the minister.

Ms. Florence Ievers: Yes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Okay.

First of all, I'd like to thank you for coming here today.

I just have a couple of questions.

As you well know, over the last several months we heard from a number of witnesses, and although many witnesses spoke about some of the strengths of Status of Women, they also talked about some of the shortcomings. Part of what we heard from women was that they often felt they weren't consulted. They felt that they weren't included in decision-making, they weren't included in developing policy, that sometimes the consultation was cursory or quite superficial, and then they weren't included in any of the solutions once the problems were identified.

So I wonder if you could specifically talk about plans that Status of Women might have to address that.

Ms. Florence Ievers: I think you've hit on an interesting issue. I said earlier that Status of Women Canada does not own any of the policy of the government, except perhaps we have a little more ownership on gender-based analysis because we're promoting it very much.

Consultation with stakeholders has been hit and miss. In some areas it's worked well; in others it leaves something to be desired. I don't think Status of Women is alone in that situation. A number of government departments are coming to grips with how to include stakeholders in policy-making and program development. I look forward to having a strategy that will talk about accountability, that will look at policy issues, that will have a diagnostic that will help us measure ourselves, but that will have built into it a consultation mechanism, so consultation is not necessarily left to the whim of the day or done by accident but is done much more systematically.

We've seen in other countries that some consultation mechanisms have been built into their yearly planning. This is something we will be consulting with groups on to ensure we develop together the appropriate mechanisms to do that. If you are going to consult, you want to consult and have a result, to have it lead somewhere.

We will be working not just within Status of Women, obviously, but with the rest of government to ensure that the voices of women are heard at a number of levels. It's one thing to consult with us; it's another thing to consult with those who really make the decisions. I think we, Status of Women, could be a facilitator in ensuring that those voices are heard. I plan to build that into the strategy we're in the process of beginning to develop.

• (1600)

Ms. Jean Crowder: I have a question about accountability. It's a word that gets banded about a fair bit, but what we also heard from some women's groups was about the kind of accountability. In many

of the programs and services women's groups are involved with, whether it's program delivery or whether it's research, when we start talking about accountability, often people want to count widgets. We know that for many people the long-term changes don't take one or two years, they take decades.

We often look for simplistic ways of looking at accountability that really do a great disservice to the changes that are actually happening in women's and children's lives. When you talk about accountability, I wonder if you could be more explicit about what you mean by accountability, because I must admit I get a little nervous when people are talking about that as if it's the be-all and end-all in program delivery.

Ms. Florence Ievers: I couldn't agree with you more that counting widgets is not necessarily the way to go. If you're going to look at results for gender equality, you do have to look at it over the long term. With poverty, for instance, there is no instant program that will provide a solution. You need to look at things overall.

We need to develop ways where yearly we need to report on where Canada is going, and it doesn't have to be a bunch of numbers. I think that is the kind of accountability we need to build into the work we do. For gender-based analysis, I think we have done our fair share of putting it on the map, and you have done your fair share of putting it on the map of the government and outside. I think now when you talk about gender-based analysis, very few people don't know what it is, or at least if they don't know what it is, they'll ask us, what is it, what can we do, and is it something I should be doing?

I think on gender-based analysis there would need to be more accountability built in there, such as, are people doing it? And if they're doing it and not applying it, why? Those are the kinds of questions...and that's really not counting widgets. It's looking at whether we are really advancing the situation of women. Are we improving women's lives? If not, well, we should be doing something else.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have a quick question for Madam Ievers. What future plans do you have for Status of Women Canada?

Ms. Florence Ievers: I will certainly be putting all of my energies in the coming months into developing the government's new strategy for gender equality. You've heard the minister talk about that. That is certainly her priority in the coming months; therefore, it is my priority. I want to develop a strategy that will have built-in accountability and will promote the systematic use of gender-based analysis. As a priority for Status of Women Canada, I also want to have a strategy that, in the short term, anyway, will have us looking at poverty among women, and also aboriginal women. Those are the two areas where Status of Women Canada will put the focus of its work.

My work in the next two years, as I see it, is to devise and contribute, with Status of Women Canada and with our partners, the best strategy to advance gender equality for the next five years, and then to begin to implement it. You can develop a strategy in six months and consult and have all the bells and whistles on it, but if it ends up on a shelf and it doesn't take life, you might as well not have it. So my work will be first to develop the strategy and get buy-in. Once the strategy is developed, I hope the government adopts it. Then I will work very hard, with my team and my partners across the federal government and across the federation, to put it in place so that it takes hold, so that when we report back to the CEDAW committee in 2007, we'll be proud of our achievements.

• (1605)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Could you explain some of the challenges you have faced as the coordinator of Status of Women Canada?

Ms. Florence Ievers: I have faced some challenges. I expected gender equality to be an easier issue than it is. I thought people would be easily convinced that gender-based analysis was the way to go, but I found out quickly enough, after the first few years I was at Status of Women Canada, that unless Status of Women made a specific effort to train and to develop tools for others to gain a better understanding of gender equality, things would not get done.

I've also told myself in my ultra wishes that eventually, if we worked hard and we mainstreamed gender, the work of Status of Women would be done. But new issues always come to the fore. I'm talking of things like trafficking and other issues nobody was talking about 10 or 20 years ago, but which became challenges as we went on.

There were challenges. We're a small agency. We have a very horizontal mandate, a very wide mandate. Everyone expects us to have the solution to everything, and we don't. Everyone expects that when we put something on the table, people will listen and do it. That's not the way it works; you have to work in partnership. We don't own any policy at Status of Women, so even though we may have a view on an issue, we don't necessarily bring the solution.

But it's been a very enriching experience. I find there are a lot of energies all around. Many are more and more aware of the importance of achieving equality between women and men, and some would say that equality has been achieved now that we have the Charter of Rights and what more do you want? As you all know, we're far from equality. We have equality in law, but we don't have equality in fact. That's what I find is challenging, but in a very positive way. There are challenges, but there is a solution there, and it's with hard work and collaboration and work with you and others that we'll get there.

The Chair: Thank you.

It's just about the end of the time.

Mr. Powers is next.

Mr. Russ Powers (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, Lib.): Welcome, Ms. Ievers.

I don't know whether your attendance today is part of a prescribed process. If it wasn't the case, then I feel it was an unnecessary exercise. Without hesitation or reservation, I certainly support your nomination for reappointment. We've seen you in action around the

table here; I also saw you in action in New York, and you've carried yourself admirably in your position from that standpoint.

I have two questions for you. The first one is—and you started to allude to the plan of action as it related to Status of Women Canada—what are the items you see that may appear on the blotter, items that we have to deal with within any very foreseeable future as it relates to the Status of Women Canada?

Ms. Florence Ievers: As we devise the strategy and try to build in more accountability, obviously these will be big issues to deal with. Related to issues of accountability, governance issues are big issues. But the issues that Status of Women have decided to focus their energies on in the next number of years are poverty and aboriginal women. The agenda there is not necessarily clear, but certainly the necessity is there. Those are the areas we will be working on.

• (1610)

Mr. Russ Powers: When is the review planning to...?

Ms. Florence Ievers: When will our plan be ready for discussion?

Mr. Russ Powers: Yes.

Ms. Florence Ievers: We hope to be able to work on it through the summer and possibly begin consultations with you and a number of others in the early fall. I'm crossing my fingers that before the end of the calendar year we'll have a strategy to put to the government.

Mr. Russ Powers: Okay.

I have just a final question. I think for all of us as members of Parliament, and also yourself, there are reasons we why came and there are probably areas of interest we're involved in. Are there areas of interest that evolve around your work in Status of Women Canada that you think we should perhaps focus some of our attentions on or that if you ever got the time you would like to put a little more detail into?

Ms. Florence Ievers: I've been very impressed with the work you've done so far. You've done a lot of work on our funding program, and the evaluation is under way. You've done work on gender-based analysis that has already borne fruit, so I'm very grateful for that.

You're doing work on access to benefits. We feel that's an issue where women are often left out. It's an issue that's not as well understood as others, but it can have a great impact on alleviating poverty and making women more economically secure.

I come back to poverty and aboriginal women, but these are hard issues to grapple with. We've been trying to do that for a number of years, and we will continue to try.

The issue of accountability for us is key. You can work on issues, but if the accountability isn't there you're not necessarily sure you're measuring the results properly. That is something the United Nations has brought to our attention, and it's something we see in our work at Status of Women. If more accountability were built in, some things would be easier to ensure progress on.

I would like to continue this dialogue further with you. If there are issues we would like your research and views on.... It's not that we wouldn't want your views on everything, but I know there are limits to what you can do as a committee and what we can do as Status of Women. I would welcome continuing to work together with you to identify issues as they come up, so we can find solutions together. You certainly reinforce the work we do. Perhaps we can give life to some of the work you do in the work we do with the rest of the government.

Mr. Russ Powers: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Powers.

Madame Bonsant.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Good afternoon, Ms. Ivers.

You know that the past is an indication of what the future holds in store. The issue of aboriginal women's property is currently being dealt with. Are you getting organized with regard to the charia law? I would not want poor aboriginal women in the streets replaced by poor Muslim women in the streets.

Ms. Florence Ievers: For the time being, sharia law is more a provincial area of jurisdiction. I know what is going on in Ontario. It is also a matter which is of concern to the Department of Justice. Clearly, regardless of the group of women involved and the measures adopted, we support programs and policies which foster women's equality. We do not endorse things that go against these greater principles.

Ms. France Bonsant: In Quebec, we have legislation governing the sharing of assets, but I am concerned by the fact that some people want to dominate these women. Are there not members of this religion who could help Status of Women Canada abolish these things and tell these people that assets belong to everyone and should be shared?

Ms. Florence Ievers: The issue of division of property in a marriage is a provincial area of jurisdiction, and it would be difficult for us to encroach in this area. However, I must tell you that we are concerned about all women. If there are policies or practices which are an impediment to equality, clearly, we will not support them. Through our subsidies we have offered support to certain Muslim women's groups so that they could carry out studies and look into these questions in greater detail. I do not have before me the results of these studies, but this is probably the type of questions you would find therein. We will have to see the results of these studies.

•(1615)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Bonsant.

Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I actually just wanted to come back for a minute around.... You indicated you're going to have a draft plan by the end of the calendar year. Hopefully? Okay.

Would the plan be to bring it to the committee as well?

Ms. Florence Ievers: I don't know how exactly we'll work that out. I would very much see the involvement of the committee in

developing our new action plan; I see it as a given. The mechanisms—how we do it and what is best for you—are things I think we'll need to think about in the course of this summer.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I also want to ask you a quick question about aboriginal women. As you are aware, there are a number of government departments working on issues to do with first nations. There's the department itself, but also off-reserve people get considered under Social Development, under Human Resources, under Justice—so many different departments have an aspect of what's happening with aboriginal communities.

A case in point is the Sisters in Spirit. The Native Women's Association of Canada just got a significant grant to take a look at the second phase of the Sisters in Spirit, but my understanding is three different departments were involved in that funding decision. How would you see working with other departments? What would your plan be? It is such a convoluted, complex piece.

Ms. Florence Ievers: We were given the responsibility to coordinate the activities under the Sisters in Spirit initiative. We were very proud and honoured to be given that responsibility of coordination. We will be sitting down with a number of departments that have responsibilities that touch on that issue. We have been working for almost a year now with the Native Women's Association of Canada, who in turn are working with other aboriginal women's groups—I'm thinking of the Métis and the Inuit—to have all aboriginal women be part of this initiative. But we will be working with a number of departments—not only the ones you mentioned but a number of others—to bring those views to the fore.

Ms. Jean Crowder: That's specifically around Sisters in Spirit. What about other initiatives around women and poverty for first nations? For example, we heard from women around the transition houses about how women on reserve don't have access to transition houses in many of the isolated communities. That's just one small example of some of the issues that are facing aboriginal communities.

Ms. Florence Ievers: Currently we work in collaboration with other departments. It's hit and miss. We hope that with the new strategy there will be more of a systematic use of that process, so that bringing people to the table to discuss an issue that has a particular impact on gender equality, either of all women or of a specific group of women, will be more the way to go. Right now, it's left much to our initiative whether we want to do that. At times a department will call us and say, "We're trying to get a grip on this kind of issue; would you like to sit down with us to discuss it? We'd like your views."

We do work with other departments.

Ms. Jean Crowder: It's a challenge. We heard from a number of government departments about how policy sometimes seems to be developed in silos, and it's a challenge to communicate. On Friday, the youth walkers for suicide prevention in aboriginal communities were on the Hill, and I understand they were meeting with Health, for example, on Monday. That's just an example of a very complicated situation where, from the outside, it appears that sometimes the coordination isn't there around these issues.

That's more of a comment.

•(1620)

Ms. Florence Ievers: Government is becoming increasingly complex, and dealing with horizontal issues like gender equality is becoming more complex as well. That's why we're looking forward to having a strategy that will spell out some of these things, some of the accountabilities, so that we can ensure some progress.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have Ms. Kadis next, then Ms. Smith.

Mrs. Susan Kadis (Thornhill, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

It interests me that you mentioned Sisters in Spirit. But with respect to violence against women in general, what would you like to achieve? I know poverty plays a part. Do you have some ideas?

Ms. Florence Ievers: It's not that violence is not important; it is extremely important. You touched on it. It's true, it's very much linked to poverty. It's linked to economic empowerment and human rights. There is no magic solution. We work on issues of violence. We have put together, with the provinces and territories, a statistical report on the incidence of violence in Canada. We are in the process of updating that report, and we expect it to be available soon. I think in 2006, possibly, we'll have new data. This will help not only the federal government, but also other members of the federation to look at gaps and areas where more work needs to be done.

There's some work going on at Health with regard to violence. We're contributors. At Status of Women, we have the family violence initiative, which we're proud to get money for. We've put our money into helping and looking at the situation of aboriginal women. We have Sisters in Spirit, and that is a big issue. It will require a lot of effort on the part of Status of Women to coordinate that initiative. We need to make sure that five years from now the Native Women's Association of Canada can keep it going and that they are able to influence policies effectively during the next five years.

We have a number of funds invested in initiatives regarding violence against women through the women's program. We do a lot of work there. But violence is like poverty. It touches a number of departments, so it's an area where we need to work together more closely. We've chosen to work with the provinces and territories to at least get the base data. At times people say, what violence? How much? Having the data has proven to be useful. We have two sets of data now in our statistical profile on violence, and we hope the third benchmark will lead to indicators. We're crossing our fingers, because this would be very helpful.

Mrs. Susan Kadis: Do you think that the reinstatement of core funding can assist in this area? This was being looked at.

Ms. Florence Ievers: That remains to be examined. We've read your report. We will look at the results of the evaluation. This is part and parcel of developing a new strategy. How we deal with our stakeholders is an element of the new strategy. We need to develop how we consult, how we fund, how we establish our criteria. All of these things are part of it.

The Chair: Ms. Smith.

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you. It's so nice to have you here today. I was one of the ones who did want to meet you.

I understand that the current government has been in for a decade. The Status of Women is a relatively new project. It's good to hear about all of the initiatives at the Status of Women. This is a time where we can get to know you a bit.

Mr. Powers made the comment that everything was fine. I know the Prime Minister's office is responsible for making appointments. You come under governor in council appointments, which are made on advice from the Privy Council Office. Is that correct?

Ms. Florence Ievers: It's on the advice of the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Minister responsible for the Status of Women.

•(1625)

Mrs. Joy Smith: Have you seen this briefing note?

Ms. Florence Ievers: No, I have not seen it.

Mrs. Joy Smith: This briefing note is what I just stated.

Ms. Florence Ievers: I don't know.

Mrs. Joy Smith: So from your point of view, it's from the minister's office.

Ms. Florence Ievers: I think I was appointed by the Prime Minister, or the cabinet, or the governor in council on the recommendation of the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women.

Mrs. Joy Smith: So you've been a part of this particular initiative for a number of years.

Ms. Florence Ievers: I've been the coordinator since 1997.

Mrs. Joy Smith: I think you're to be commended for that because a lot of women's initiatives have gone forward. We're in a climate right now that is a little bit tenuous. It's a minority government, and there are initiatives being put forward that we want to see really happen.

You talked about gender-based analysis, and we've talked about that a lot around the table. I have to admit that here on this side of the House I've really been pushing the aboriginal part of it, because I've had firsthand experience. I've been absolutely floored by the inequality of these women, and it has moved me to really push this on this committee.

From my point of view, we need to take action on these very important kinds of initiatives, rather than spending the next decade writing reports and doing this kind of thing. I want to see some outcomes. I think everyone around this table wants to see some outcomes. That is possibly one of the reasons we need to get to know you and your point of view. So could you please elaborate a little more on the aboriginal end of it, Ms. Ievers?

I'm interested in hearing, is it your function to take direction from the government currently in power, or is it your function to put in new ideas, or is it your function to address this committee? I'm not clear on that.

Ms. Florence Ievers: I would say it's a bit of all of the above, in a way. I have a minister whom I report to directly—Minister Frulla, who has appeared before the committee. Our role, in our documents, is to coordinate policy with regard to Status of Women and related programs.

We don't initiate policy in our department—that is the business of other departments—but we certainly are called upon to provide advice on policies as they pertain to the Status of Women as things come forward. At times we're very much involved in the development of a policy; at other times less so.

With a small agency like Status of Women Canada, it's clear that we can't be everything to everyone, so we do have to pick our spots. That's why, recently and in the coming years, we will be looking in a more focused way at issues of poverty and issues with regard to aboriginal women.

Aboriginal women face a number of challenges. Poverty is one of them. Violence is another.

Mrs. Joy Smith: With all due respect, I know the issues. I'm more interested in you, actually. I know I'm running out of time, but I must say that your experience is a great asset around this table. I'm positive that you know the issues.

Could you tell us a little about yourself? What motivated you to get so involved in women's issues, and what motivated you to become part of this?

The Chair: You're just about out of time, so could you respond briefly?

Ms. Florence Ievers: I'm a woman, and I'm very interested in making sure that my nieces, nephews, sons, and daughters are equal in this society. I found over time that women were not, and I lived through it in my business and professional life.

Years ago I was a member of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. There I was more involved in looking at issues in a much more focused way. I have always been committed to making sure that women have their place, and their full place, in society. When this job came about in 1997, I was hoping I could rise to the challenge, and I felt that it was quite an honour to be able to make a contribution to this.

I'm a lawyer by profession. I've worked in a number of community and cultural organizations. I worked for the government for a number of years. My area of expertise at the federal level was intergovernmental affairs. The secretariat I headed in the Privy Council Office was called Intergovernmental Affairs. So there's negotiation.

I felt that Canada had a place for women, that women were there in our Constitution, but to give life to our Constitution and to make sure we live up to it, we still had work to do, and I wanted to contribute to that work. That's essentially why I'm here.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ievers.

Ms. Torsney.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: Thank you.

Ms. Ievers, there seems to be some confusion about how you received your job in 1997 and how you received your job as executive assistant to the President of the Treasury Board or as assistant secretary of the intergovernmental affairs bureau within the Privy Council. So I wonder if you could explain for the whole committee just how public services are organized, how we have

competitions, and that at the end of the day the heads of various agencies are confirmed by the prime minister of the day.

Ms. Florence Ievers: My career in the federal public service started in 1998 as a result of a competition. The government was looking for an assistant secretary. The secretariat at the time was called liaison and integration in the federal-provincial relations office. I went to a competition held by the Public Service Commission in 1998 and won that competition. I became assistant secretary of intergovernmental affairs in the federal-provincial relations office. When that was abolished, my secretariat was integrated completely into the Privy Council Office.

On how I became executive assistant to the President of the Treasury Board, he was my deputy minister when I was assistant secretary of intergovernmental affairs at FPRO. At first, if you'll recall, that minister was the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs. I had been a public servant for a time and was looking for a different experience, and that seemed interesting at the time.

When I wanted to reintegrate into the public service after I had spent enough time doing the job of executive assistant, this job was mentioned to me by the then Secretary of the Treasury Board as something I might find interesting. I was looking for something new and different from intergovernmental affairs, which I had been doing for many years. When this was mentioned, because of my commitment to gender equality, my work on the advisory council, and my recognition that a lot more work needed to be done, I decided to accept this challenge. So here I am.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: Again, is it a competition that's run by the public service?

Ms. Florence Ievers: No. When I was appointed in 1998 it was....

A voice: 1988.

Ms. Florence Ievers: In 1988 it was a.... This is an order in council appointment. This is an appointment made on the recommendation of a minister to the cabinet. That's how this comes about.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: In 1988, of course, the Conservatives were in office.

Ms. Florence Ievers: That was a competition.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: Confirming you're not a political appointee—

Ms. Florence Ievers: No. The minister at the time was Lowell Murray.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: There is clearly a lot of work to be done within government and within government structures, but there are obviously a tremendous number of people who work in the private sector.

What kind of interaction or role do you have in advancing the issue of women in the private sector within large corporations, for instance?

Ms. Florence Ievers: That's something we at Status of Women have not been very good at. Our limited efforts have been to contribute to a task force on the role of women entrepreneurs. We've done work with APEC and the Women Leaders' Network. We have taken part in some conferences, and we're doing some work with Foreign Affairs looking at exporting, bringing women up to speed, and making sure our programs are not excluding some good energies that are there.

But as an agency, however we're configured after we've developed our strategy, we need to do that outreach in a much more systematic way. We are not benefiting from a lot of energies, knowledge, and expertise that could be brought to the work we do. That's something I intend to build into the new strategy and make sure we do, because we're not necessarily tapping into the resources we could, and we're not benefiting from all that's out there to help us.

• (1635)

Hon. Paddy Torsney: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Are there any other questions?

I would like to thank you very much for coming today. I think you gave us a very comprehensive overview of what you do and where you've been. On behalf of the committee, let me thank you.

I'd like to just read into the record here, for clarification, the certificate of nomination:

Notice is hereby given that the Minister of Canadian Heritage nominates Florence Ievers of Ottawa, Ontario, to be the Coordinator, Office of the Coordinator (Status of Women Canada).

So it's there that the nomination is by the minister.

Thank you very much again.

Ms. Florence Ievers: Thank you.

The Chair: Are there any motions?

Ms. Torsney.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: I move to confirm the appointment.

The Chair: Thank you. Would you use the word "endorse"?

Hon. Paddy Torsney: I'd love to endorse it.

The Chair: Is there a seconder?

Thank you, Ms. Guergis.

Is there any discussion on the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you for coming.

Ms. Florence Ievers: I will continue to work with you.

The Chair: Thank you. We look forward to it.

We have another motion on the floor. Notice was given in appropriate timelines by Ms. Guergis.

Would you like to read it and speak to it?

Ms. Helena Guergis: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will read for you the motion here today. This is my first motion, so I hope everyone is patient with me:

Whereas Aboriginal women living on reserves have been denied their Rights pursuant to the Charter of Rights and freedoms and thereby not being treated equally with other women in Canada living off reserve, and whereas women in Canada living on reserve often do not have the right to stay in their home following a marriage breakup or death of their spouse, I hereby move that this Committee study ways in which Aboriginal Women can be immediately guaranteed housing rights.

The Chair: Thank you.

Do you want to speak to it?

Ms. Helena Guergis: I think it's self-explanatory.

The Chair: Okay.

I'm just going to recognize hands as they come up, rather than in order.

I see Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Thank you.

I appreciate our colleague bringing forward this issue. I guess I'm wondering what would be different from a report that was just tabled this month, in June? There were some really specific recommendations in it, and the government has 120 days to respond to it. It appeared from this report that they recommended both a short-term and a long-term course of action. The immediate action was "that the government immediately draft interim stand-alone legislation or amendments to the Indian Act to make provincial/territorial matrimonial property laws apply to real property on reserve lands".

When I looked at the list of witnesses they had seen, it appeared they had consulted fairly extensively with the native women's community. So I wondered what it was specifically you were asking the committee to study that would be different from this report that has just come forward. I'm a little confused.

Ms. Helena Guergis: I'm not sure the timing on that will be appropriate or that they'll even follow through with it. The research I've done.... I have one copy of a report here in front of me, *A Hard Bed To Lie In*, done in 2003; then there's the other one, of course, that Prentice has done.

I continually see people making recommendations to the government but nothing being done, and I believe the role of this committee is to work to help solve these issues and to help the government move along in this process.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I wonder if it might not be more appropriate, then, to specifically.... I don't know who would be responsible for drafting stand-alone legislation—I don't know whether it would be Justice or Indian affairs—but I wonder if it might not be more appropriate to ask them to appear before the committee to outline their timetable for acting on the committee's reports and recommendations, since they've already done a substantial amount of work of looking at witnesses. There was a whole series of reports commissioned as a result of this, and the reports actually look pretty good.

I guess I'm just concerned about duplicating work that's already done, especially since this has just been tabled. It would be different if it had been languishing for months and months, but this is from June 2005; there hasn't been an opportunity to respond yet.

So it would be interesting to hear, from the committee responsible for drafting the legislation, when they were going to do it.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Smith.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Just to answer the member's question, here for the first time in this committee on the status of women we have a formal motion going forward from us as a group saying we want to study ways in which aboriginal women can be immediately guaranteed housing rights. That's a very good thing, and certainly I'm a little puzzled at the member's question. I believe there are several reserves, or some reserves, in her particular area. I think the intent of this is not to prolong the study as much as it is to find ways of putting an action plan together that would actually make this work.

I have sat on committees for years at the provincial level, talking the same talk. I think what has come out of this committee is the fact that we can listen and listen and listen, but here, in the year 2005, we've put down a motion as a status of women committee to make sure this action takes place. I think that is the important thing.

So we have two choices: to debate the report—or debate the motion or whatever—or to sit down, adopt the motion, and agree to get an action plan where aboriginal women can immediately be guaranteed housing rights.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have Ms. Bulte, Ms. Torsney, and Ms. Brunelle.

Hon. Sarmite Bulte: Again, I too have the report by the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development in front of me here. Their first recommendation is to instruct the government to immediately draft interim and stand-alone legislation and amendments to the Indian Act to deal with the property laws relating to real property on reserve lands. It goes through a number of recommendations. This has just been tabled. The government has 150 days to respond.

I think there are other issues. I see this as duplication. We've got the benefits for the self-employed. We're looking also at pay equity—I'd like to be doing clause-by-clause on the pay equity legislation, quite frankly. I think the committee has studied this with a number of witnesses—and they're talking about immediate action here; they're not talking about continuing to move on and do more consultations. Again, it follows upon what the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights has recommended, which is the same thing.

We already have all this work being done, so I don't know what we'd gain. If there was inaction, I would agree, but there's no evidence that there is going to be inaction on this issue, so I don't know why we need to duplicate it. Again, it's up to the committee, but I just think there are so many other issues that we have, so why duplicate? Nobody else is studying the self-employed. Nobody else is studying pay equity. I think this is an opportunity for us to grasp niche markets and move ahead on those, as opposed to duplicating work that other committees and Senate committees are doing.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Torsney.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: I listened with interest to what Ms. Smith said, but in fact the motion does not say “develop an action plan”; it says “study ways in which Aboriginal Women can be immediately guaranteed housing rights”. We're talking about doing a study.

This is perhaps one of the last days the House could be sitting. It could be sitting next week, but we already have another study under way. I'm not sure if they're supposed to run concurrently. It's not clear from Ms. Guergis' discussion. Let's say it was in the fall. Then it would overlap with the response to the reports that have already been outlined by both the Senate and the House.

I'm not sure how you actually have a study going when the government is already responding to a request for specific action, or how that immediately solves the problem. This is a recommendation for a further study on an issue that has been studied and just reported on by another committee, which has demanded a response within 150 days.

• (1645)

The Chair: The clerk advises us that it's 120 days.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: The second thing, of course, is that there was Bill C-7, which would have put aboriginal peoples under the Human Rights Act. That bill didn't pass, as far as I'm aware, but there are clearly many ways the government is taking action to guarantee housing rights for aboriginal women, and we'll continue to absolutely support that. But I don't think another study by this committee on an issue that's already being studied should be recommended.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have a speaking order, and the next one is Ms. Brunelle, then Mrs. Smith, and then Ms. Crowder.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paule Brunelle: I find this motion a bit restrictive in that it only talks about housing rights. Having sat on a committee looking at prostitution, I know that native women often face violence and poverty. Many native women prostitutes have been murdered. I was very moved by their situation, and I know that urgent steps are needed to provide them with housing, but I think we need to find a way to help them more generally, either by passing a bill or presenting a report. We need to take a more comprehensive approach. I would not like to see us focus on just one point.

What could we do? As Jean suggested, we could try to meet with the people working on this report, recommend that a bill be drafted and wait for the government's response. We need to do something more comprehensive to help aboriginal women. The motion deals with only one aspect of their situation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Brunelle.

Ms. Smith, and then Ms. Crowder.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm hearing from members opposite that this motion is basically not needed because there's a lot of action, a lot of things happening right now, and the current government is taking action on aboriginal housing at this point. We're hearing from members opposite that this is a redundant motion right now and it's unnecessary to pass this motion today. Is that what I'm hearing? Could you please clarify that?

The Chair: I have a speaking order. I'll come back to you in a minute.

Ms. Crowder, Ms. Torsney, and then Ms. Kadis.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I want to be correct, but I wanted to suggest an amendment. Can I speak and then suggest an amendment?

The Chair: Sure.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Okay. I don't want to screw up the rules here.

Ms. Smith rightly pointed out that in my riding I have the largest on-reserve population in British Columbia. It's an absolutely critical issue.

One of the things that prompted my response on this was the fact that the aboriginal women who appeared before this committee asked for a specific process. Part of what happened was that they wanted some legal mechanism to deal with their situation on reserve.

I don't actually know if an amendment is required to do this, but I was going to suggest that we actually ask whoever would be responsible to come before the committee to explain what the process would look like and what the timetable would look like. I don't know which department it would be.

I would suggest that Ms. Guergis could consider this to be a friendly amendment.

The Chair: I think that's a different motion, Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Is it a different motion? Okay.

The Chair: Yes. I think we'll deal with this one first.

Ms. Helena Guergis: I don't think it's a different motion. I would welcome that amendment, as long as we can put a timeframe in here.

The Chair: You can only have one motion. This is a different motion. This deals with a certain action for the committee. Ms. Crowder is asking for the department to respond to another committee's report.

Ms. Jean Crowder: In the very last part, where it says "Committee study", we could say "this committee invite the appropriate department to come before the standing committee". I don't know who it is.

•(1650)

The Chair: The issue is really on matrimonial property rights.

Ms. Jean Crowder: It's matrimonial property rights legislation.

The Chair: Okay. Do you want to give us the wording again?

Ms. Jean Crowder: Okay. I move that this committee invite the appropriate department. I can't name the department because I don't know if it's Indian Affairs or Justice.

The Chair: It's coming out of Indian Affairs.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Then it's "invite the Minister of Indian Affairs to appear before the committee in response to the June 2005 report". How's that?

The Chair: That amendment is out of order, I'm sorry.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Then "that they invite the Minister of Indian Affairs to appear before the committee to discuss the proposed legislation".

The Chair: That is a separate motion.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Well, how do we get it in...?

The Chair: I think what we'll do is deal with one. We're dealing with the subject, and we can do a follow-up motion.

The other suggestion is to look at the government's response in 120 days as well, which is another way of going.

I have a speaking order, and let me just go in that order. I have Ms. Torsney and then Mrs. Kadis.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: First of all, I'd like to clarify something. I think I speak for everybody on this side when I say we absolutely are concerned about this issue and want this issue addressed, and there should be no doubt about that.

The second thing is, to Ms. Smith's specific question, another study has just been done to which the government will be responding. Doing a study when another group has just done a study is not necessarily the most effective way.

It's possible you could ask the committee chair to come and talk about what the committee did and why it did it and what it's expecting, perhaps to summarize. Perhaps we could ask the clerk here to circulate the results from that committee. Perhaps we could all be instructed to think of how we could identify ways we could encourage the minister to respond as quickly as possible.

But doing a study when another committee has just done a study doesn't really advance the issue, necessarily. It just asks the same witnesses to come back and talk about the same things.

I think there could be a broader issue, as Ms. Brunelle has said, about the status of aboriginal women in Canada, not just about matrimonial property rights but about a whole series of things. That could be helpful.

I'm still unclear as to when it's proposed this study—that is the motion that's before us—is actually to be done and what priority it has vis-à-vis other studies the committee is already doing. Perhaps some clarity on that could provide some other option.

I think we could look at other ways. We could perhaps ask our colleague Nancy Karetak-Lindell and representatives of that committee to come and talk about their committee's work and their expectations.

The Chair: I'll just inform this committee that I know this report, which some of us have brought with us, has been unanimously approved by all parties. It has all-party endorsement.

Ms. Kadis.

Mrs. Susan Kadis: Thank you, Madam Chair.

As has been referred to a few times, I think we should be focusing our energy and our time on areas that are not being addressed.

I did have the opportunity and privilege of serving on that committee on behalf of another member, and it happened to be the day they were discussing a lot of these very serious, very complex issues. Obviously, a great deal of work had gone into that; I could see that myself first-hand.

It doesn't seem to me to be particularly logical or to facilitate things for us to now begin this topic; however, I think it's certainly not a topic inappropriate for us. We do have an interest. We should be following what is taking place.

I agree wholeheartedly that if there weren't actions being proposed, and hopefully taken expeditiously, we should absolutely be stepping in. I think it's just pure logic.

Also, it's not a case of wanting to duplicate or undermine, but it's rather to show support for what they were doing, perhaps with some kind of motion. I was thinking along the lines of that to expedite the actions that are being proposed and not have it languish or whatever. That's how I see it, having sat there and having a bit of first-hand knowledge of what was being put forward at that committee.

Again, we have these areas we have now identified to look at in the time we do have. These are very pivotal areas as well, and they're not being addressed by other committees.

• (1655)

The Chair: One of the suggestions I was going to make was to review the recommendations and see if we have anything to enhance what is there, but I'll leave it to the committee.

Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I don't know the procedural piece around this; I'm sure the clerk will tell me.

I wonder if we can table the motion until we hear a response back from the government, because they have to respond. It's not 120 sitting days, right?

The Clerk of the Committee: It's calendar days.

Ms. Jean Crowder: So by the time we come back in the fall, a response should be available.

The Chair: The clerk advises me that their response is expected on October 1.

Ms. Jean Crowder: So we would be back. Then we would expect a report fairly quickly after that. It would give us an opportunity to see exactly what was done and whether we wanted to follow up, so if we held the motion in abeyance until then....

The Chair: I have Ms. Guergis, and then Ms. Bulte.

Ms. Helena Guergis: I'm hearing that everyone is concerned about the word "study". I am open to amendment on this. This is a report with 120 recommendations. This is one issue I was trying to take out to advance. I was hoping the committee would be interested in trying to push this along, being the status of women committee.

I am open to tabling an amendment, but I would much rather amend it and somehow put this forward. If we have to remove the

word "study" we can do that. I don't understand how we can't move that the committee....

Can I even amend my own motion?

The Chair: You can make a friendly amendment.

Ms. Helena Guergis: I'm not opposed to having something similar to what Ms. Crowder has said and inviting whomever to come forward to discuss how we can immediately guarantee housing rights. I don't know why we can't bring someone specific to the report, or the minister, to ask how we could do this.

The Chair: May I make a suggestion? I'm just thinking aloud, but perhaps this motion can be withdrawn at this time and we can put forward a motion asking the minister and/or the chair of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, who prepared a very comprehensive report—

Ms. Helena Guergis: Listen, we've already had someone around the table pass a comment that we shouldn't be duplicating work, and I'm not trying to duplicate work here. I'm trying to raise awareness of this important issue. It's shocking and appalling that it's going on in this country, and I'm shocked to hear that everyone around the table wants to just throw it in with the other 120 recommendations and not proceed with a positive motion.

The Chair: There are three recommendations on this report. I'm not sure what you're referring to. What report are you referring to, Ms. Guergis?

Ms. Helena Guergis: I'm talking about the report, and if I've misspoken, I apologize for that.

The Chair: There are three recommendations in this report.

Ms. Helena Guergis: I'm trying to proceed with one issue to draw attention to it. How can this committee guarantee that aboriginal women have their housing rights? If we don't need to study it again—I'm happy to take the advice of my colleagues around the table—perhaps we can reword it in a way that will ensure that the government understands that the status of women committee is very serious about guaranteeing housing rights to aboriginal women.

The Chair: Ms. Bulte.

Hon. Sarmite Bulte: I want to speak to the recommendations and the suggestion to bring the chair or minister here. What in fact is recommended is that draft legislation be tabled immediately. Having just gone through a process of getting legislation tabled after a committee report, there is substantial negotiation that goes on back and forth with the justice department, with the department handling the file, and with the stakeholders, to ensure that the wording properly reflects the intent.

I think we are jumping the gun here. We have to let the justice department and the Department of Indian and Aboriginal Affairs do their work. I concur with Ms. Crowder that when the response comes and we're not satisfied with it, we should look at it then. But to ask someone, or even the chair, to suggest what the wording of this legislation would be if we looked at.... They're calling upon specific legislation, specific consultations, specific amendments to be made to the Indian Act. It's very technical in nature.

The committees I've been on before have basically asked the department to table legislation. That was their response. It is the way of a committee to say, "We're not waiting anymore. We want the legislation. No more study."

So I agree with Ms. Crowder that we should hold down this motion at this time and wait for the response. At that time, if we're not satisfied with the response and there is no legislation, we can certainly move on it. That's my recommendation at this time.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you.

I have two more speakers, and then we'll call the question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paule Brunelle: Madam Chair..

[*English*]

The Chair: I have Ms. Smith, and then you can talk, Madam Brunelle.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Thank you.

I would agree with Ms. Guergis. What she's tried to do here, I think very effectively, in a very positive way.... If you saw Ms. Guergis' résumé you would see the help she has given to women. She has an amazing résumé...with how she's worked with women. When I look at what she's trying to do here today...what she's trying to do is make sure that nothing falls through the cracks. We can talk indignantly about legislation; we can talk indignantly about how this motion isn't correct or this word is at the beginning or the end of a sentence. But the flavour and the concept of what Ms. Guergis brought forward today was her concern—and my concern—for the aboriginal women of our country.

We say, well, we're doing this right now. The fact of the matter is I guess we just don't have a lot of faith in that. The current government has been in for over a decade, and we're trying to work here as the status of women committee—not as political parties, but as the status of women committee—sticking up for the rights of women. I think we need to give this motion a little room, and I think we need to not withdraw this motion. I'm open to tabling it, as Ms. Crowder has suggested. I'm also open to taking out the word "study", because I acknowledge the fact that members opposite are concerned that there has been a lot of study going on, and I understand that.

But having said that, I think in this committee, as status of women, we have to shore up and support what's going on right now for the betterment of aboriginal women in this country. I think by making a statement like this as the status of women committee, as a whole group, what we're doing is shoring up what's happening right now, supporting what's happening right now, and putting a little bit more pressure on by saying we're watching; we want this to happen and we want to see that there's a timeline to it.

I think we need to know what the timeline is for this to be completed. You said it's 120 days. What date would that fall on?

Hon. Sarmite Bulte: October 1.

Mrs. Joy Smith: I would make a suggestion. What we can do as status of women is amend this particular motion that was brought forward and say put it in abeyance or table it to a specific time,

October 1, then review the timeline and the action plan that's going to happen after October 1. So we, as a whole status of women group, would have a voice for the aboriginal women here in our country, in our provinces across this nation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Brunelle.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paule Brunelle: I think that everyone around the table feels that the situation of aboriginal women is an important issue and that we need to address it.

That said, since we seem to be getting bogged down and we have expressed our opinions, I would like to call the vote on the motion. I think that I will vote against it, not because it is not important but because it does not deal with the whole problem. I will suggest that Ms. Guergis bring forward a motion at a later date dealing with the whole situation of aboriginal women, which would enable us to work on all the problems facing them.

• (1705)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Torsney.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: I will signal that I will also be happy to have this motion come to a vote. I, too, will be voting with Ms. Brunelle and asking for a broader study.

I would recommend that when people are going to bring forward a motion, they check what other committees are doing. People have tried gently in other ways to refer the member opposite to the recommendations that were already passed by another committee of this House unanimously, and in fact since apparently she doesn't have a copy of the report—

Ms. Helena Guergis: I do have a copy of the report. I referred to it when I first started. Thank you very much.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: Then perhaps some of your colleagues aren't aware of it, Ms. Guergis, but in fact the first recommendation is:

That, consulting with the Native Women's Association of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations to the extent possible, considering the urgency of the situation, the government immediately draft interim stand-alone legislation or amendments to the Indian Act to make provincial/territorial matrimonial property laws apply to real property on reserve lands.

It goes through a whole series of things, and it's asking for immediate action.

In fact, the third recommendation is:

That, in broad consultation with First Nations organizations and communities, the government undertake immediate review of section 67 of the Canadian Human Rights Act with a view to amending that legislation

- to protect on-reserve First Nations individuals from discrimination under the Indian Act and
- to insert an interpretive clause requiring a balance between individual and community interests.

These are recommendations that were passed by another committee. If there is a motion that says the status of women committee support the work that was done by our colleagues on another committee, fine. I think everyone would vote for it. That would be a proper motion that would be before us. But that's not the motion that's before us. It's a motion to undertake a study to immediately do something on which another committee has already recommended a course of action. So this motion is barely in order, and is incorrect, since it won't actually achieve anything that is either timely or immediate in terms of the way it's written.

I think we should, at most, endorse this; and secondly, I hope Ms. Brunelle will produce a motion that we can all vote for, to look at the context, as all three other parties have said, of the situation of aboriginal women across a whole series of issues.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Crowder, Ms. Neville, and Ms. Guergis, and then I'm going to call the question.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I think Ms. Guergis has an amendment. I wonder if I could hold my speaking spot and defer to Ms. Guergis' amendment.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Guergis, go ahead.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Thank you very much.

After speaking with the clerk and getting his advice, very much what Ms. Torsney has said, I would like to amend the motion after the word "Committee":

I hereby move that this committee endorse the report, which identifies ways in which aboriginal women can be immediately guaranteed housing rights.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): Yes, but then we have a whole report to endorse. That's only one recommendation.

A hon. member: We could pull the recommendation out of the report.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: Can I make a friendly amendment?

The friendly amendment would be in fact that it would say:

I hereby move that this committee encourage the government to act immediately on the recommendations of the report of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development specific to on-reserve matrimonial real property.

The Chair: Are you comfortable with that?

Are there any more speakers?

(Amendment agreed to)

(Motion as amended agreed to)

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you very much. I think this was a good discussion.

To those of you who haven't read the report, I recommend that you pull it out, because it's an excellent one.

The meeting is adjourned.

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