House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, February 8, 2005

———

Chair

The Honourable Don Boudria

All parliamentary publications are available on the
``Parliamentary Internet Parlementaire´´ at the following address:

http://www.parl.gc.ca

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Tuesday, February 8, 2005

● (1110)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Don Boudria (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.)): Order, please.

Colleagues, I want to remind everyone that this is a televised meeting.

The order before us, as you will recall, is the following:

[*Translation*]

The order of reference before us and which we will consider reads as follows:

> By unanimous consent, it was ordered,— That, further to the address in reply to the Speech from the Throne, the House instructed the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to recommend a process that engages citizens and parliamentarians in an examination of our electoral system with a review of all options.

We have witnesses appearing before us this morning who will stay until 12:30 P.M. After 12:30 P.M., I strongly suggest we hold a meeting to plan our future business. If the committee so chooses, we will also pass a report on the hearings we had last week with the Clerk of the House of Commons. So we will be hearing our witnesses until 12:30 P.M., after which we will proceed as I mentioned. Of course, we will also be able to then discuss what witnesses we wish to have appear at our future meetings.

[*English*]

This morning I'd like to welcome the panel of witnesses who are with us. We have Madam Judith Maxwell, president, Canadian Policy Research Networks. Welcome. And we have as well Mary Pat MacKinnon, the director. Welcome.

[*Translation*]

We also have, from the Public Policy Forum, Ms. Jodi White and from the Institute for Research on Public Policy, Dr. Leslie Seidle, Senior Research Associate. Welcome.

I thought we had another witness yet. Here she is, it is Professor Dr. Anne Dale, of the Faculty of Science, Technology and Environment, Royal Roads University.

Since we have a panel of several people, we would request, where we have several people from one organization, to choose one spokesperson to make a short statement of a few minutes, if you choose to make one. Then our colleagues will have questions to ask.

[*English*]

That being said, then, who would like to go first? On my list here, if I take them the way they're listed, Ms. Maxwell, you seem to be first.

Take perhaps a maximum of five minutes each so we can allow members time to ask questions, if you don't mind.

Madam Maxwell.

Ms. Judith Maxwell (President, Canadian Policy Research Networks): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'm very happy to have this opportunity to appear with Mary Pat MacKinnon to discuss with the committee the issues leading up to the selection of a process for discussing electoral reform with Canadians.

I'd like to tell you a little bit today about CPRN's experiences with engaging citizens over recent years. Based on that experience, I have some recommendations for the committee and also criteria that could be set out to gauge the process you ultimately choose in terms of its prospects for success.

I'll comment very briefly on our experience. We've now conducted four citizen dialogues with representative samples of Canadians aged 18 and over. Three of them were national and one was regional. The one you may be most familiar with was the citizens' dialogue on the future of health care in Canada, which was conducted for the Romanow commission. We're now planning a dialogue with young Canadians aged 18 to 25 to explore with them the barriers they see to expressing their full citizenship, including their rights and ability or willingness to vote.

These citizens we've worked with have been randomly selected. When they receive an invitation to participate in a day-long discussion on a policy issue, we find they accept the invitation partly out of a sense of responsibility but also out of a sense of curiosity. They learn a lot during their day of discussion, and they are very elated by the end of their day because they feel they've been empowered, and the follow-up studies show that they become more engaged in their community following the experience.

The importance of engaging citizens is that their input is a complement to the input from experts and stakeholders. Committees of Parliament most often hear from experts and stakeholders, who have a lot to contribute that has more to do with the technical and operational issues around implementation. What citizens give you is something that's very different. You are able to discern where their core values are and how they set their priorities. They will be quite clear with you about what trade-offs they're willing to accept and what they will not accept. They can also be very clear in telling you what conditions they would impose if certain options were implemented.

If you take a broad perspective in looking at the ultimate impact of the empowerment and the engagement that follow, however, you see that involving citizens leads to a greater sense of trust in the political process and obviously an opportunity to improve civic literacy. Both of these are foundations for a healthy democracy.

Let me skip now to a few recommendations, which I'll state very crisply so I don't take up too much time, but I'll be happy to elaborate on them. First of all, there's the work that's been done in recent years by the provinces and the Law Commission, which have built up a very useful body of expert knowledge and have demonstrated how much Canadians want to participate in these discussions. The first recommendation is to build on that work.

Our second recommendation is that it's important to engage the citizens, but I think you would also find it very valuable to create opportunities after the citizens have talked together for them to have a conversation with parliamentarians directly. We would suggest that you do that through random selection of both the citizens and the parliamentarians.

Thirdly, you should think about any process you choose as an opportunity to improve civic literacy, not only for the citizens who participate but also for the others who can become involved as a result of their work. You can take the results from the formally structured dialogues and translate that into other engagement processes such as e-dialogue, study circles, town halls, and that sort of thing. Many thousands of Canadians can actually make their voice heard if you use a frame that comes from the thinking of the first group of citizens who were randomly selected.

● (1115)

The fourth recommendation is that in planning the process, you will need to be prepared for the fact that citizens will inevitably want to broaden the discussion. As we all know, there's far more to the democratic deficit than the electoral process, and Canadians will have these other issues on their minds as they participate. We know from the dialogues we've done that they will almost always take a holistic view to the issue. They see the surrounding issues, and they want to talk about key drivers. So they may well wish to discuss issues such as how to build trust for elected officials and public institutions, how to open up the committee process, and how to engage MPs on the policy agenda.

Obviously, as a complement to any citizen involvement here, you will need to engage the media up front so that they can be part of the process of civic learning. Experiences in other countries show that the media can be an important partner for this sort of thing.

I'll just take a couple of minutes to highlight the criteria—there are five of them—that will give you a very high probability of having a successful engagement process. First, you need to start with clear and objective background information, which the citizens receive before they begin their discussion.

Second, you need to ensure that the process is highly objective, with professional facilitation and also sufficient time. If you give them an hour or two, you're not going to get the quality and depth of understanding you will if they have more time.

Third, it's important to conduct the whole process with a high degree of transparency and accountability. Part of that is to provide people with early reporting on the results, what people said, in a very balanced way.

Fourth, the whole process of citizen involvement needs to focus on finding the common ground. You have to acknowledge and report on where there are differences. But if people are going to move ahead and come to some kind of judgment on the issues you put before them, they need to acknowledge where the differences are first and to start to work through them to expand the common ground.

The fifth criterion would be that these dialogues become a social contract between government and its citizens. If you expect citizens to commit their time and energy to talking through issues where they are expected to respect the public interest, then governments have to commit to objective listening and very clear feedback.

To close, Mr. Chairman, we see electoral reform as a way to demonstrate to citizens that their votes have meaning. But we've seen no evidence yet of a sustained increase in voter turnout. In order to build that kind of commitment so that more people go to the polls to vote, Canada would need to establish a relationship between citizens and parliamentarians that would continue between elections.

I would be pleased to answer your questions, and I certainly look forward to hearing what my colleagues will have to say today.

Thank you.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Maxwell.

The next panellist is Madam Jodi White of the Public Policy Forum.

Ms. Jodi White (President, Public Policy Forum): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I thought I might just begin with a short note about what the Public Policy Forum is. We're a member-based organization, a neutral, non-partisan organization really dedicated to ensuring that good government is everybody's business. Our member base includes the private sector, the public sector, and the not-for-profit sector, which we try to bring together to discuss public policy, to further the understanding of the issues, and to really try to do something specifically about what we see as the real isolation of Ottawa, and therefore of some of the issues here.

In terms of my remarks, I have five main points I want to suggest, and I really see these as advice on ground rules or working principles that you might take into account in terms of what you're going to do in this process.

I'd start by saying that I think we really need to spend time on a diagnosis. Before we start planning solutions, we have to make sure we've defined the problem and that we're trying to deal with that problem. I know that sounds obvious, but let's be clear that we know what we're trying to fix. We don't want to confuse any of the symptoms with the problems, things like falling voter turnout, growing cynicism, and the rise of smaller parties. I think those are symptoms, not the problems, and I really encourage you to try to delve into what are the problems before we start addressing the symptoms.

Secondly, in relation to the scope of the process, I think we have to interpret the electoral system broadly, and we shouldn't limit ourselves to proportional representation. I'm not suggesting that's what you're doing, but I know some people do that fairly quickly when they get into the discussion. I think this committee in the past has always taken a broad view and I would encourage you to do it again.

I'd also say, let's not eliminate the status quo. We could spend some quite valuable time recalling why we have the system we have and how it responds to what we want. Let's be clear about what we want to preserve, before we start changing everything.

Thirdly, be sure to put this exercise in the broad context of democratic renewal—and Judy has talked about that as well. The apparent crisis in trust and confidence will not be fixed by tinkering with the electoral system. This may be a terrific opportunity to engage the population in a process or dialogue on civic literacy—and again, you heard Judy use that term as well. I think there are all sorts of things the public out there would like to talk about. As I say, I think we should look at this as an opportunity to engage that.

In the broader context, we need to establish some fundamental principles and values—and you certainly see that's what's being done in other countries when they've been looking at this question. They've been outlining things like fairness, demographic representation, accessibility, or those kinds of principles. I think it'll be important for this country that you do that. We all know the corrosive aspects of cynicism. I think you should work, and I encourage you to work, to make this a positive instrument with the population.

Fourthly, take the time to think about the questions to which we need answers. Tailor the consultations to fit those questions. I think we can learn a lot from what the provinces have done in the last few years; there have been a number of different and quite interesting experiments in the provinces.

In the case of citizens, I would recommend that you don't move too fast to have them look at alternative models, but engage them first in a deliberative process on values and principles.

In terms of academics, we all know that a great deal of good work is already there and can be pulled together.

I think we need to plan a role for parliamentarians, perhaps as facilitators of the consultation process in their ridings. But I do caution that we must ensure we don't politicize this process. If that happens, it will add to the cynicism and turn off citizens; they will see politicians as purveyors of their own special interests, and that's in no one's interest. So we want to look at a broad variety of consultations, including town hall meetings, online participation, deliberative dialogues, and expert round tables throughout the phases of the program you put together.

Finally, I just want to say that we should ensure that you know how you will use the information and the ideas you receive. Again, consultations can add to cynicism if they're used badly or dishonestly.

● (1125)

The best way to ensure maximum benefits is to decide in advance how the feedback will be used in the next phase. It's in everyone's interest to manage expectations, and you can do that if you establish clear parameters of what issues are within the scope of your work.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madam White.

[*Translation*]

Our next panellist is Dr. Leslie Seidle, Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Research on Public Policy.

Dr. Leslie Seidle (Senior Research Associate, Institute for Research on Public Policy): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like first of all to thank you for inviting our Chair, Hugh Segal, to appear before the committee. Unfortunately, he is travelling abroad this week. So it is a pleasure for me to represent the Institute today.

The Institute was founded in 1972 and has a longstanding interest in governance and federalism.

We presently have undertaken a program called "Strengthening Canadian Democracy", which was launched in 1999. Under this program, we take into account what Ms. White just mentioned, that electoral reform, if ever we have one, is not a universal remedy. The lack of legitimacy or credibility of our political institutions has much wider causes. We need to look at a whole range of issues such as political financing, voter registration, parliamentary reform, the role of the media, etc. In the context of our program, we have looked at all these questions and published several papers. Next week, on February 15,—and I believe all MPs have received an invitation—we will release a book titled Strengthening Canadian Democracy in which we compiled most of these papers.

[*English*]

I just want to now turn to the question of objectives. My two colleagues have talked about objectives for a review process for the electoral system, and I want to put four on the table. You have this in the copy of my notes that I sent around.

The first one is promoting the participation of citizens, and we have a number of experiments and experiences we can draw on in that regard. The expertise of organizations like CPRN is very significant, as is that of the Public Policy Forum. Second is ensuring openness and accessibility. Third is drawing on expertise and experience, and last, but certainly not least, is involving parliamentarians.

A central point in all this is that the credibility of the process will affect the legitimacy of the outcome—the outcome in this case being a change of the electoral system, if that's the decision that is made.

Today, to focus our discussion, I want to put before you three models and in a sense analyze them, although not terribly systematically, against these four objectives. The three models are a citizens' assembly, a commission or task force, and a special parliamentary committee.

Everyone around the table has heard about the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly. Well, it's not entirely original; it's a variation of what's called a constituent assembly, which is a relatively large body, usually chosen to be representative of the jurisdiction that is sponsoring it, and it comes to a decision or a series of decisions. So it is deliberative as opposed to merely consultative or advisory.

The British Columbia one had 160 members, including the chair, and there was one woman and one man per constituency. The selection process started out on a random basis, and I can go into that in more detail, although you may be meeting Jack Blaney or Ken Carty later on in your process. It was a very intensive process. The members spent 12 weekends together, if you add the learning phase that started about a year ago and their deliberation phase in the autumn. That didn't include the time they spent in the hearings. They broke up into groups and went throughout the province and heard citizens and groups and so on. They also had a very extensive website that they used for reports on their meetings, and they allowed people to make submissions on their own and so on.

So there's a great deal of openness and transparency in it.

A very important point about it is that it was not merely advisory. Their recommendation, which is in favour of the single transferable vote, goes directly to a referendum that's going to be held on May 17. The cabinet could not vote down the recommendation. That was the ground rule that was set.

I just want to put before you another example of a citizens' assembly, not that old. Australia in 1998 held a constituent assembly on the question of the head of state. That one was a bit different. It had 152 members, but half of them were elected by voters and the other half were appointed by the prime minister. Within the second group of 76—and this is a notable point, I think, for your committee—there were 40 commonwealth and state parliamentarians. So it was a citizens' assembly, but with segments within it.

It met over a period of 12 days in February of 1998, but it met only that one time, unlike the B.C. Citizens' Assembly, where people came and went each weekend over the different phases. They chose a new method for selecting what would have been a president. He or she was to be selected by Parliament. That was not approved in the referendum in 1999.

Summing up on the citizens' assembly model, it's strong on representation, strong on the opportunity for deliberation by the members. You can improve the access to other citizens by IT processes and so on, which is what they did in British Columbia. Research and expertise play a role, because you would need to have a learning program as they did in B.C.

It was really very impressive what they did there, and I can answer questions about it. However, the opportunity for parliamentarians to be involved is somewhat limited, unless you did as they did in Australia, which is to reserve some seats. You can imagine a bit of a halfway house or a variant.

I'll just be very brief on the commission model, because I think it's well known. It's probably not so much in favour these days. I think you have to ask what the flavour of the month is, and Mr. Broadbent would probably agree with me that the citizens' assembly gets fairly good marks these days.

Commissions, particularly if they're called "royal", don't get such good marks. But they do have a couple of strengths, such as the capacity to bring in expertise through research studies and so on. Also, experience is usually quite high. The Lortie commission on electoral reform that I worked for over a decade ago had two former MPs on it.

● (1130)

It's also an opportunity to bring in at least former parliamentarians, if not present ones. It's difficult for present parliamentarians to give the kind of time commitment that a commission usually requires. The Lortie commission worked for two years. The New Brunswick one that just reported a few weeks ago took a whole year and did a really impressive job of looking at not only the electoral system but other elements of democratic reform.

The third model I'd like to put on the table is a special parliamentary committee. I say special because I don't think, with all respect, that a standing committee, however strong its members, research staff, etc., are, particularly in a minority situation, can really carry out the kind of mandate required. Essentially what you would need to do with a parliamentary body is give a group of people—and it might be smaller than a standing committee—a special assignment. The group of MPs would then learn together, engage citizens together, and deliberate together.

I think that cohesiveness and that chance to draw on the expertise you would need from good research, and so on, would likely yield a more successful outcome within a parliamentary committee. There are many modalities that need to be thought of, including probably giving the committee a bit more leeway in commissioning research and managing its own budget.

The other thing is that as with the citizens' assembly, you can add on to a parliamentary committee. You can incorporate information technology channels, for example, allowing people to make submissions and not just briefs. Electronic workbooks were used, for example, in the disability committee, the subcommittee that Carolyn Bennett led a few years ago.

You could even, if you were creative, add some dialogue groups. Mr. Broadbent, in his paper last week, suggested dialogue groups. I think you were suggesting them on a separate track, but they could be, in a sense, subcontracted under the committee if the committee had the budget to do it. There would be a little bit more of a joining of a parliamentary process and a citizen engagement process.

I'll just finish with a comment or two on the whole question of whether there should be a referendum. When you go to New Zealand you can talk to them about that question. The Scots also had a referendum, although it was a referendum about the whole devolution package. As people know, there's going to be one in Prince Edward Island later this year on a mixed system. The New Brunswick commission recommended one, but Premier Lord hasn't pronounced himself on that. The people in Quebec are quite allergic to having a referendum on electoral reform, for reasons I could go into.

As far as a referendum on the federal electoral system, if we got that far, my recommendation is that before the process got too far along, the government should commit to having a referendum on any new electoral system that was proposed to Parliament. As in New Zealand, the referendum should be held on the model, as opposed to a brand-new election act, or whatever. You don't need to get that far along. If the referendum votes down the model, there's no point in spending a lot of time drafting and going through all the dotting of i's and crossing of t's.

It seems to me, in light of the New Zealand experience and the Charlottetown accord, to move forward on a such a major institutional change without a referendum wouldn't be consistent with the spirit of democratic renewal.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

● (1135)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Seidle.

We will now go to,

[*English*]

from the Royal Roads University, Dr. Anne Dale, professor,Faculty of Science, Technology and Environment.

Welcome, Professor.

If you'll make a brief statement, then we'll have questions from colleagues.

Dr. Anne Dale (Professor, Faculty of Science, Technology and Environment, Royal Roads University): Thank you very much for the privilege of being here today and sharing some of my ideas. I hope I don't offend anybody with my sort of pointy-headed comments, being in the academy.

I think we're all aware that Canadians are fundamentally different today. Canadian society is different today than it has been in previous generations. More people today have post-secondary university education than those who have completed high school, and we're increasingly plural and diverse. So then how do you design community engagement processes that are going to respect that diversity and plurality?

Even more important is your work, because we have so few young people voting: 24% of young people in Canada and 18% of American youth. But given some of the traffic that my students brilliantly send to me over the Internet—their spoofs on the political system and globalization—that doesn't mean they're not engaged, but they're engaged in fundamentally different ways.

If we're going to engage young people and engage the increasingly plural aspects of our society, I think we have to look at multiple ways of communicating with them—for example, the blog phenomenon. A colleague of mine and I were talking last week and we said "How the hell can we get Kyoto on everybody's Blackberry?" That's what we're talking about here, I think, in terms of engagement.

It's pretty basic that in my research in sustainable community development, if people don't feel they are being heard, they become disempowered and they disengage. We're finding the most successful environmental campaigns are those that are able to go into a community and identify the key networks that already exist in the community. But more importantly, there are key leaders in a community that we're identifying as nodes or connectors, who can work across multiple networks and coordinate across those networks, and they are critical leaders for social change and for diffusion of information and knowledge in a community.

It reminds me of a question that Harvie Andre asked us when we were designing the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy: "Do you want to be influential, or do you want to be famous?"

It seems to me that we need an electoral system that is influential, that is modern, but more critically that reflects the plurality and diversity of this country. But diversity just doesn't happen; it has to be deliberately planned for and designed, with key individuals, those nodes and connectors, identified.

I also believe public dialogue around key public policy issues is necessary, because with our increasing sophistication, we want a greater say in decisions that affect us. Moral authority is no longer sufficient, and political leaders need to be seen to be engaged and seen to be leading these public dialogues. In addition, there are also wonderful leaders in communities who could be identified, who could lead these public dialogues.

Simon Jackson comes to mind, a young man who, at 20 years of age, now has built an international network of people to save the spirit bear, or the white bear, in British Columbia. He has millions of young people now engaged in that campaign.

Why is dialogue more important now than it has been in the past? I think it's because of the nature of the issues that are facing us. The problems are messy, they're wicked, they span multiple jurisdictions, and they involve competing and conflicting interests. They are also dynamically connected and cannot be dealt with in isolation.

I only need to think about climate change and the management of nuclear waste. I have been leading a series of three e-dialogues in the management of nuclear waste. I thought, as a former public servant, I had been used to arbitrating across competing interests. That is the hottest issue, I think, that our country is facing, and the vested interests are so great. I've never seen anything like it in my life.

There is another additional feature, though, that I think we have to keep in mind. My university led a national dialogue on post-Kyoto: what does it mean to Canadians? We didn't publicize it very much because it's still at the research stage, how to use these Internet technologies. Even with limited publicity, we had over 5,000 Canadians engaged. But we learned something, and I understand the Romanow commission learned the same thing: Canadians may know the issue, but their knowledge underneath that issue is very, very shallow.

So I think engagement strategies, in addition to taking diversity into account, have to consider that they have a literacy component to them. You cannot just think that Canadians are going to understand the complexity of all the components of a particular issue that you're going out with.

● (1140)

I urge you not to talk about e-consultation but to talk about e-dialogue. Canadians are fed up with consultations. We want to see what the new realities are and what the new models are. Let's get on with it. That's why we didn't position our dialogue as Kyoto negative or positive, the old left-right. Post-Kyoto, what will the new world look like? What do dematerialization strategies look like? What do new systems of Parliament look like? What will our new institutions that reflect the 21st century look like?

In these processes it's not just about going out and talking to people. You can use them as a strategic opportunity to deliberately create new networks in the way you bring people together, and you can also create agency in the communities of people you can bring together or you can destroy that agency.

What you have to do is communicate, using the tools Canadians are using. Young people are using the Internet; there's an extraordinary degree of literacy. The age barrier issues with people 50 and over I've seen in my research just don't exist when I'm communicating with a population between 18 and 35. Therefore, your engagement process should include and build on our work with the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy.

Multi-stakeholder processes: it should involve a symmetry; a complementarity among radio, town halls, e-dialogues, and face-to-face meetings; and a multiplicity of people to lead them, people who others respect. They must include parliamentarians, because I do think there is a deep, abiding respect for parliamentarians even among the young people in this country. We all know what an unsustainable lifestyle all of you have.

I'd like to now just briefly talk about e-dialogues and what an e-dialogue is. An e-dialogue is bringing together the best minds in this country around a critical public policy issue in real time. You are actually dialoguing online, and we've now created the software at my university.

My president is a little upset with me—this hopefully won't be on the record—because I've open-sourced it. I've refused to allow it to be private because that's the antithesis of what community engagement strategies are all about.

So they come together in real time. My vision for these e-dialogues is that Canadians would tune in the same as some Canadians tune into the Ideas program on the radio between seven and nine. It has tremendous opportunity and the dialogue is very meaningful.

What we're looking at are three research questions: can you use the Internet for substantive dialogue, can you use the Internet to increase literacy around critical public policy issues—and in my world it's sustainable development—and can you use the Internet to inform the public policy community by bridging to the research community? And can you make this more a national than a federal dialogue? We have failed to become a national government rather than a federal government.

I'd like to think this was rocket science, and as a researcher I should have known better than to dig a little deeper. I don't know how many of you are aware of the 1930s' and 1940s' *Citizens' Radio Forum* and *National Farm Radio Forum* programs. We created in this country a national farm policy by getting to where people were gathering, using the radio to get people to gather in kitchens around the country. That was a strategic partnership between our broadcaster and something called the Canadian Association for Adult Education.

I think any engagement process the House of Commons uses should actively and deliberately try to include the research community.

Based on my learning from leading the nuclear waste management dialogue—and in a lot of cases the controversy—I know there are a lot of important questions before you begin your process. Who gets to frame the issue? The framing of the issue is critically important to acceptance by the public. It has come through to us loud and clear that Canadians are not accepting the separation of nuclear energy from the management of nuclear waste. Who gets to frame the issue, who gets to ask the questions, who has the authority, and who is considered an expert?

As well, one of the things we're considering at our university—and I would hope that somehow or other there could be a partnership—is looking at leading a national dialogue on the meaning of the good society in Canada. It's going to be framed around the idea that we have ecological failure, but we also have institutional failure. Our institutions are not reflecting modern reality. They're based on problems that no longer exist, and they don't reflect the issues that are facing us, the broad horizontal issues.

● (1145)

So in these processes I think we have to deliberately design —we are capable of it as sophisticated human beings—in ways to reconcile and reconnect the solitary silos and stovepipes that so characterize our country, and do so based on community needs and interests, what we value as Canadians and what makes this country so great, because I do believe we have lost shared meaning about what is important to the future of this country.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ma'am.

Just to remind colleagues, the mandate before us is to recommend a process that engages citizens and parliamentarians in an examination of our electoral system. I say that just so we're all aware that is the only thing that's been referred to this committee for the process here.

Colleagues, a number of MPs have asked to ask questions. Please keep the questions and answers to a maximum of five minutes. That way I can have some people recognized—and even then, not all of you will be. I apologize ahead of time. I didn't invent clocks; I just live with them.

Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Dale Johnston (Wetaskiwin, CPC): I'll defer to Scott.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Thanks very much.

I think I'll perhaps direct my questions primarily at Dr. Seidle, if I could.

I listened with interest to your comments on the various models. I may as well be honest in admitting that of the models you put forward, I personally favour the citizens' assembly model.

I have a great deal of personal familiarity with the Australian constitutional convention. I was an observer at the plenary session for virtually the entire event, and probably spent more time there than any other non-delegate to the convention.

One observation, and I think you'd probably agree with me on this, is that while they are similar in some ways, they are different in one very important way. The citizens' assembly is essentially randomly selected and therefore is a giant jury, whereas the constitutional convention was effectively a one-off legislature that met one time to consider and then disbanded, which leads to certain differences. There were very clear parties, essentially, that were established in the Australian model. We had the Australian Republican Movement, for example, and several others. And there were party lines that dictated to some degree how they would negotiate things, like whether the president should be called "president" or "governor general", which wound up being a key issue, and whether the president would be elected or appointed, which of course was also a key issue. That makes me tend to think there's an advantage to the jury-type model; we tend not to come out with those pre-existing divisions. I simply throw that out as an observation on which I would be interested in your comments.

Because of the time constraints, I will throw out my other comments as well for your response. It seems to me that the Australian model failed and ultimately was rejected by the voters in the 1999 referendum, because what was proposed was essentially a republic with an appointed president, but none of the details were put down. The legislative draftsmen from the prime minister's office then got involved and produced something that included dramatic changes to the relationship between the prime minister and the parliament. Of course, the Australians are very sensitive about a crisis that occurred in this regard in 1975. Effectively, the prime minister had the right to fire the head of state and replace him with a person of his choice. This meant effectively that in the event the governor general or the president would have to use the reserve powers that go to the head of state, the prime minister could simply dispose of them and get his will. That, I think, was fundamentally why the thing was objected to. That occurred because the legislative draftsmen got involved after the assembly was wrapped up.

This brings me back to your observation, that it's better to go to the people with a recommendation as opposed to completed legislation. On this other side of the equation, I am just thinking that in 1919 when the Swiss had a referendum on adopting proportional representation, I believe it was the actual completed constitutional amendment—although I stand to be corrected—that went before the people in 1919 and was successfully adopted.

So bearing all of these things in mind, I'd just be interested in your comments.

● (1150)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Dr. Seidle.

[*English*]

Dr. Leslie Seidle: As a general point, I would agree with you on the principle of random selection for the members of a citizens' assembly. I think it gives a great deal of legitimacy to the body. The other point to remember, though, about the British Columbia one is that a key issue was that it was deliberative, and it wasn't merely an advisory body. The decision it came to—and it could have kept the status quo—was the one the government had to act on; that also was key.

If you did a random selection of citizens and gave them simply a consultative mandate, that body would have less muscle, shall we say. However, the world is never perfect, and we can learn from these experiences. I was at the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly the weekend they chose the single transferable vote. I was fascinated by the discussion that went on around the room, but I was a bit puzzled by a kind of lack of connection with some of the issues that would be, and are, showing up as being important to legislators, important to the political class.

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly delegates not only could not be sitting politicians, local or provincial or federal, but, if I recall correctly, could not have run as candidates for any of those jurisdictions in the last two elections, so the political corpus or the legislative corpus was not represented within the assembly. If you were designing a perfect assembly, you might say we want equal men and women, we want to be sure we have aboriginal members, we want to be sure we have minorities. If you go way down the list, maybe you want to be sure that the political class is also there. When you're looking for diversity, maybe you'll want to be sure that the political class is part of your diversity.

You people have experience, so that's why I put down the Australian model, not as something to be followed very closely, but if one wants to be creative, you could think of a citizens' assembly that maybe had 5% reserved for current parliamentarians, provincial as well—that could be something you could think about—or former ones. They go into the commission model. The Lortie commission had five members; two were former parliamentarians.

We now have so much experience in this country that we can begin to do a little bit of mix and match, knowing that the citizens' assembly in B.C. is a Cadillac. But we can't all drive Cadillacs; maybe a Passat is a good thing to drive too.

●(1155)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor.

Madam Longfield, you're next. Let's have short questions and answers so we can fit in as many people as possible.

Hon. Judi Longfield (Whitby—Oshawa, Lib.): All right.

I have a very short question. Dr. Dale, you posed a question and I'm going to throw it back. Who do you think should frame the question?

Dr. Seidle, you indicated that you agreed there should be a referendum, but you also stated that the referendum should happen after there had been a decision by Parliament—that Parliament should vote on a model and then have a referendum, so I'd like a little more information on that.

Also—and I thank the researchers for some of the questions here—what's the appropriate role for lobby and special interest groups in the consultation process? How do you ensure that the process does not become hijacked by a particular group? Do you foresee a role for Elections Canada in the consultation process? What is the best way to inform the public and focus debate during a consultation, and can you comment with reference to a consultation on electoral reform, and—

The Chair: Ms. Longfield, I'm going to have to interrupt you, because at five minutes I'll have to cut some of these answers off, and there's more than five minutes' worth already.

So please, Dr. Dale.

Dr. Anne Dale: Thank you for bouncing that question back.

I'm going to refer to our experience when we were shaping the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy in 1988, and I'd like to differentiate that body as prior to 1992, after which time government ministers have no longer been on that body. So I'm talking about a deliberately designed body that included government ministers, private sector leaders, civil society leaders, and public policy officials. Our strategic mistake was we didn't include the research community.

In terms of framing the question, we formed the same committee to design that process as we knew we needed to have as an outcome. So I think you have to have the diversity in the framing of the questions, because otherwise your engagement process fundamentally will not be seen to be legitimate. I agree with Leslie that the flaw in the B.C. assembly is the fact that parliamentarians aren't there. The biggest bang we got for our buck in the national round table was simply getting the people together in the same room so they could hear each other's stories. It sounds really soft and mushy; it ain't. You can get a lot of work done that way, because of the solitude, silos, and stovepipes that I think characterize our country.

I think the electoral office should be involved. What you do is deliberately pick those sectors that you strategically need at the table

to advance and frame the issue in a meaningful way that's going to reach out to Canadians.

The Chair: Are there any comments?

Dr. Seidle.

Dr. Leslie Seidle: On the question of a referendum and the sequencing, each of the models I put forward, including the variant on the citizens' assembly, would leave the final decision with Parliament. If you had a citizens' assembly with a high level of credibility, I think it would be very difficult for the government to say, "Thank you very much, that's a good idea, we'll put it on a shelf", or "Thank you very much, we'll take your good idea and give it to a parliamentary committee". Then it comes out quite different afterwards. The ultimate decision on moving it forward lies with Parliament.

I think the best model—and I was very interested in Mr. Reid's comment on that—would be that a sketch of the new electoral system go to the referendum. That was done in New Zealand in 1993. The legislation had not been drafted. It was the same thing for the United Kingdom. The government had produced a position paper on Scotland and Wales that had in one page or so the outline of the electoral system. When people went to vote, they were only asked to vote up or down on devolution. They weren't asked about the electoral system. It's more or less the same principle. There's no point in going too far down the pipeline. It will be interesting to see if it gets through in British Columbia because they have a higher threshold than a simple majority. If it doesn't get through, then the drafters in Victoria, who perhaps are doing a bit of early work, can turn off their computers on that one.

The Chair: Ms. Maxwell, you wanted to add something.

Ms. Judith Maxwell: I want to reply to the question about stakeholders. I think parliamentary committees do a good job of engaging the stakeholders and the experts. Those voices have to be heard in any conversation like that. But I would see that as being separate from the contribution the citizens would make. I agree with Ann Dale about the need for diversity in that room. I think it's important for the ultimate decision to be based on a combination of the values and priorities outlined by the citizens and their sense of trade-offs, alongside what you're going to hear from the stakeholders and the experts.

●(1200)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madam Picard.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Pauline Picard (Drummond, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I believe it is Ms. White who said that the crisis with regard to the trust of the people will not necessarily be resolved through changes to the electoral system.

Have you asked yourselves if it is really the electoral system that is the major problem? I am not saying that we should not be looking at this system, nor that it should not be improved, but is it not rather the rules and procedures of the House as they exist today that are creating a democratic deficit when majority governments are in place?

To give you but one example, when we meet in committee, the opposition parties propose amendments to bills because their MPs are listening to citizens who wish to see changes or to see us pass laws that fit their needs. But when we reach the clause by clause study stage, the majority votes against the opposition parties without further ado.

Have you looked at that aspect with a view to, without necessarily turning the whole electoral system upside down, correcting this democratic deficit attributable to the rules and procedures of the House?

[*English*]

Ms. Jodi White: I haven't looked at that one in terms of the rules with regard to committees. But I certainly agree with you that it is not just the electoral system that is the problem. That was very much my point. This is a very broad problem. The crisis in trust and confidence is not just in public institutions and the political system either. It's also in the private sector. We're seeing it in a lot of places. So really my cautionary point was simply, don't think this is going to fix all of those other problems. We all have to look at a lot more than simply the electoral system. One could even state the case that maybe the problem isn't the electoral system. It's much more accountability, performance, and a number of other things you'd be well aware of.

In terms of the rules, we haven't looked at those specifically, but I think all of our organizations have been involved in discussions on those kinds of things.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Do you have a supplementary question, Ms. Picard?

Ms. Pauline Picard: No, thank you. That is all.

The Chair: Madam Boivin.

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, Lib.): I very much enjoyed your presentations. I want to be sure that I have understood you correctly. In essence, what you are suggesting is that we first and foremost do the diagnosis. Before looking at what system might resolve the problem through electoral reform... Indeed, it is as if it has become normal practice: everyone is expecting the Parliament of Canada to come up with an electoral reform because this is what is being done in several provinces, that already have somewhat of a headstart. We are perhaps a little bit behind, but there is no point in crying over spilt milk. We are now on our way.

Here now are my first priority and my first concern, as a new member of Parliament, with regard to establishing the diagnosis. We are not crazy. We are well aware of the general dissatisfaction of the average citizen, of young people, of women, of ethnic groups, of virtually everyone, vis-à-vis politicians. My impression is that through this process aimed at reaching a diagnosis, we will perhaps be in a position to have a broader view of the situation. As Ms. Picard was saying, there is perhaps some element of

parliamentary reform that could be part of the solution. We nevertheless have to look and see where the shoe is pinching.

I constantly ask myself the following question. Every time we launch a commission or some process, we gather together the whole assembly. I have great respect for your work and for ours, but the average citizen is always harder to reach. I like what you say, Dr. Dale, when you talk of taking measures to reach people, but I would like us to be a little bit more precise.

After this whole exercise, how will I know if I have or not succeeded in reaching the great majority of Canadians? That is my concern.

Often, when we launch processes, we find ourselves surrounded by all of the great specialists, by all of those who find all sorts of reasons to not vote, who do not like politicians, who do not like this or that. But how am I to go about convincing those who could not care less or who have the impression that they are not being listened to that they in fact are? I do not know if my question is clear, but we must, in all of this, be practical.

● (1205)

The Chair: Is your question addressed to Dr. Dale?

Ms. Françoise Boivin: To the panel in general, to whomever wishes to respond.

The Chair: Dr. Dale, would you like to begin? We will have to put an end to this at some point because the time granted to each member is limited.

Madam.

[*English*]

Dr. Anne Dale: I think that's critically important.

I don't want to be irreverent, but I think we have to be sexier in how we communicate and how we engage. It's just so old-fashioned and so anti-modern, as far as I'm concerned, and that's what I mean by going beyond just the parliamentary committee and identifying leaders who people respect out there who can then ensure that you're getting the engagement.

I'm sorry, but even in my world of sustainable development, I don't go to a lot of meetings any more because I see the same old faces and it's so boring. We are not national in our processes, in our outreaches, and in our procedures. We have to get there. There's so much intellectual capital, so many fascinating things happening out there. We have to capture it and we have to engage it somehow, and I do believe it's possible.

The Chair: Thank you. There's time for one time. Madam?

Ms. Mary Pat MacKinnon (Director, Public Involvement Network, Canadian Policy Research Networks): If I could add to what Ann was saying, I absolutely agree that the important thing is to get beyond those.... We have a small core group of very engaged Canadians and then we have a lot of Canadians who are not as engaged. That doesn't mean they don't care. It doesn't mean they lack civic spirit, but it does mean that we need to reach out in more innovative ways. One of the ways to do it can be through random selection, and there could be tools that parliamentarians could have to help them engage at their local level with citizens around public issues.

I think we have to look at it strategically and think about what are the most important things to do first. Some of the diagnostic work I think has to be done and then be followed by a careful deliberative process to bring citizens in, in a way whereby they know it's going to have some meaning.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Broadbent.

[*English*]

Hon. Ed Broadbent (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll use the time to the maximum advantage, having these experts here.

On the consultative process, as I heard all of you, there's at least agreement around a couple of points. One is that there has to be a thorough, systematic, and transparent engagement with "ordinary citizens" who are very representative of the population. Secondly, you say that MPs should play an integral part in this process, not necessarily in those engagements but in the decision-making process. So the parliamentarian role, the citizen engagement role—all of you seem to want both of these aspects.

I add in passing, as once an early fan of the B.C. process, I realized a little late, but near the end, that it was like designing a health care system without consulting doctors. I think it was a disaster, but I'm not going to elaborate on that. None of you seem to want to go that route, the B.C. route, if I can say it.

I have a question, because you may not be before us again and we have to make a recommendation. I have, after giving it a lot of thought, personally thought we could have a two-track process that some of you may be familiar with and that I've written about. One is, running parallel would be a committee of MPs doing traditional, but important, consultation of experts, stakeholders, and so on. Running parallel to that would be the citizen consultation process that would go for the values Canadians want in an electoral system, the key principles enunciated, like the Law Commission, for example. At some point the two tracks come together, and the parliamentarians essentially, in my model—and I want you to be frank on this—would bring in the values report at some point, combine it with their own consultations of experts, and then make a recommendation to Parliament.

I'd like a quick response on the merits or negatives of that. Can we do that? Can we have those consultations running parallel across the country and then come together with the parliamentarians, having done their consultations, looking at the report coming out of the

values, and then come up with the recommendations? Could you give us a quick response to that?

● (1210)

The Chair: Mr. Broadbent, who do you want first in the limited time that's left?

Hon. Ed Broadbent: I think there are four organizations represented here, so maybe each of them.

The Chair: Let's start with Dr. Seidle.

Ms. Jodi White: I think—sorry, Leslie.

Dr. Leslie Seidle: Go ahead.

Ms. Jodi White: I fear if they're parallel they're in separate silos almost—and Ann has certainly talked about the silo. I would only say you want to make sure the parliamentarians are also connecting to the citizens, and I assume you would normally.

Two parallel tracks sound to me like they might be a long way away from each other at some point and may not converge. I think you need to converge them and go through several phases, and maybe do it on principles first and then get into the diagnosis, and then the models for change, etc. That would be my quick answer.

Dr. Leslie Seidle: I wouldn't have parallel processes at the same time.

Picking up on a couple of the comments, any exploration that is going to be centred on values, to my mind, should be early in the process. Have we really identified the problem?

The problem is also a problem of governance and not simply a problem of representation. Various people have tried. You had the Law Commission here last week and they identified the problem in a certain way. I wouldn't necessarily agree entirely with them because I come at this in large measure from a governance perspective as opposed to the representation perspective.

I think there's merit in playing around with the idea of having some form of dialogue or engagement process linked to a parliamentary committee, in a sense almost subcontracted, and it could be sequential. You could have some initial meetings and then the dialogues. Judith may want to comment on the practicality of this, but the dialogues go off and do their work, report back, and then that feeds into the parliamentary process.

The Chair: Dr. Maxwell.

Ms. Judith Maxwell: I do agree very much with the point that you need to link the two in substantive ways. You need the objective background paper to start with, and that may come from some hearings that would be held with the experts, as well as summaries of what other jurisdictions have already done in this area. Then if you have the time—and this is always a question for parliamentary activities because they're given tough deadlines—you need time to elicit the values, and then the values can influence what you're going to hear in subsequent hearings.

Parliamentarians will need a chance to actually pose those questions back. If citizens are saying this, and they won't do that, and they prefer to go in this direction in terms of what sets priorities or principles here, then you need to have the chance to test that with the experts and stakeholders.

Even more important, then, is the linkage where probably a selection or sample of the citizens, who are themselves a sample, obviously, of the population, would actually spend a day or two with the committee or with a wider sample of parliamentarians so that the citizens get a chance to put their case directly and the members have a chance to interact with them. Make it a two-way street, because there will be an evolution of thinking that comes from that engagement.

Dr. Anne Dale: If I could—

The Chair: We'll have to go to the next question. We're going to run out of time and members won't get to say anything.

Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Dale Johnston: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

One of the things that you pretty well all said today is that we have to define the problem. Is the problem that we don't have a high enough voter turnout? How is changing the system going to ensure that we'll have a higher turnout?

I know when I talk to school classes, I try to stress to them that government in one of the three forms, either municipal, provincial, or federal, really affects every aspect of your life and always will— where you work, what kind of health care is available to you, what kinds of taxes you'll pay, and probably how many children you'll be able to afford to have, every aspect of your life. If we come up with some recommendation to change the way members are elected to this place, how is that going to encourage involvement and engagement of the voters?

● (1215)

The Chair: Who are you directing that question to?

Mr. Dale Johnston: I'm directing it generally.

The Chair: Who wants to try first?

Dr. Leslie Seidle: We can just take one very practical example, and you can pursue this when you go to New Zealand. After they changed the electoral system in 1996, the turnout rose, as I recall, by about three or four points in the first election. Then in 1999 it dropped off by a couple of points, and in 2002 it stayed at exactly the same level.

So although there is some research that suggests that proportional representation countries generally have a slightly higher turnout, first, it's important not to draw a cause-and-effect out of that, because it's a much larger political universe. Secondly, in precise cases, in particular cases, in parliamentary systems such as New Zealand's, the trend is downward, as it is in most western democracies. So I think that argument should be used with a great deal of care.

The Chair: Madame Dale, do you want to try that one?

Dr. Anne Dale: Can I link back to Mr. Broadbent's question?

The Chair: Whatever.

Dr. Anne Dale: Thank you very much.

No, it's communications. I hate to give kudos, but I accessed the Prime Minister's website in the election. They were being very sophisticated, because I got his Speech from the Throne deposited in my e-mail, and it made me feel connected so that I didn't have to go somewhere to get that; I got it directly in my e-mail, and it sort of crossed the mountains. So it's part of feeling connected.

I quite agree with you. It's far beyond changing your electoral system, because that's not going to do it, but somehow or other you have to look at how to make Canadians feel connected to the institution that's so critically important to the health and well-being of their country.

I also think two-track systems work very well, as long as it's like a DNA and you weave back and forth. I think it's critical that Parliament be seen to be leading this initiative.

To get back to Madame Boivin's example, if I were doing this, I would want to take control of the scoping and the diagnostic, but I would look at who I strategically partner with, and I sure as hell would move across the country when I was doing it. It can't be in Ottawa.

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Maxwell.

Ms. Judith Maxwell: I think Anne Dale and Leslie Seidle have said it all on the question of what doesn't move the electoral vote and what might. I think it's communication between elections, rather than changing the voting system.

The Chair: Do you have another brief question?

Mr. Dale Johnston: I have just a brief comment. I really think the reason there is such a low youth turnout is because their parents don't participate. So we shouldn't just be targeting the youth; we should be targeting everybody. In my riding there was a 60% voter turnout, and we consider that to be fairly standard. That's what it has been for the last four elections. To my way of thinking, that's not high enough. That's far too low.

Could you speak briefly on the issue of mandatory voting, which they have in Australia?

The Chair: Yes or no on mandatory voting.

Ms. Judith Maxwell: No comment.

Dr. Leslie Seidle: We looked at that question when I was at Elections Canada for two years before moving to Montreal. The practicality is there. There are examples. Australia has had it for a long time. I don't think it could ever pass the charter of rights. Freedom of expression includes freedom not to express yourself.

The Chair: Dr. Dale.

Dr. Anne Dale: If you want to reach the young people, you have to have Internet voting. The security and safety people tell you it's not possible. It's now possible.

The Chair: Does anyone else have an opinion on mandatory voting?

Ms. Jodi White: I don't have an opinion on that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is Mr. Silva.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I do believe, as was stated by Madam Maxwell, that the democratic deficit will not be resolved just by electoral reform, because the issue is much more complex than that. Madam Picard spoke about engaging the opposition and members of Parliament in resolving the democratic deficit. Others have talked about Senate reform. Others want to get into a discussion about the fact that we have an appointed governor general, as opposed to an elected governor general. Our head of state is not elected. It is a complex issue, and I don't think this road we're going down will resolve all these issues.

However, I do feel the discussion about electoral reform is fundamental because we have to engage our citizens. It is important for democracy that citizens are engaged. I think its legitimacy is in fact battered by low voter participation. It's not just in terms of going to vote, but there's not even a discussion. I think apathy is not healthy for our democratic process. I believe we have to do this in order to figure out whether we have the best model and whether this model is working. Legitimacy is conferred by the fact that there is engagement by the citizens. Our system of democracy can have a majority government with 37% of the vote. I have some fundamental concerns about that. Others may not share those same concerns. But I do think it's fundamental to engage the citizens of this country in this discussion.

I didn't hear too much from the panel in relation to the issue of legitimacy and rights. They have evolved over many years. We know that when the Constitution was created in this country, women weren't allowed to vote. Then women were given the right to vote. Today we also have to question whether it is legitimate or right to have a majority government with 37% of the vote. I think this issue of legitimacy and rights needs to be addressed in this discussion.

● (1220)

The Chair: To whom are you directing your question?

Mr. Mario Silva: To the panel.

The Chair: Not all members of the panel will be able to answer because two-thirds of the time has already been used up.

Dr. Maxwell.

Ms. Judith Maxwell: I'd like to pick up on this question of communication and ongoing engagement. If you begin to engage citizens on the question of how to fix the electoral system, they're going to want to talk about other things. They will see the challenge of democratic renewal in a much broader landscape. If you're going to engage them, you have to listen and there has to be a response. If you engage them, you'll build legitimacy and credibility. But if nothing happens, then you drop down to a place that's lower than where you started. So you have to do it very thoughtfully and objectively. You have to be clear in your head that you plan to learn from this and to act on it.

The Chair: Is there time for one more? Dr. Seidle?

Dr. Leslie Seidle: Yes, I can respond very quickly to that.

I don't think the committee would go beyond its mandate if it were to propose a process that also looked at some other aspects of the democratic process in Canada.

The New Brunswick commission is an interesting model. It had a very large mandate, but some of the best parts of their report—and I recommend it to Mr. Nicholson and any others—are their recommendations on youth involvement.

The committee might want to think whether there are some tangents that it could attach to any process for looking at the electoral system. I am not proposing the whole nine yards—the monarchy and the Senate, or anything like that—but the democratic engagement that does relate to the House of Commons.

The Chair: Madam Dale, and that will be it for that one.

Dr. Anne Dale: I think you've raised a critical issue. Along with the low youth participation is that whole issue of legitimacy and how to get at it, and if there is some way, in terms of that mandatory voting, to turn that into a positive. We've debated this at my university. We don't release marks now unless you've completed the professor evaluation, so there's a self-interest hook. If only you could turn that around positively, because I think a lot of people do not see the people in the House of Commons as legitimately reflecting their interests with the diversity of the issues that they think are important.

The Chair: We have run out of time, I'm afraid.

We will have the honourable Rob Nicholson next.

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Niagara Falls, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. White, you talked about an apparent crisis in trust and confidence, and Madame Picard picked up on this. Is this something that is particular to Canada, and if so, why? If it's not particular to Canada, if it is something worldwide, is it possible that changing the electoral system will make no difference whatsoever?

Ms. Jodi White: I certainly don't think it's only in Canada at all. I think we all know a number of countries have been going through these kinds of processes and have been trying to address it as well. It is very broad.

I'll go back to the last question and hook it into this. I actually think some of the problem is relevance. Besides communicating, etc., we've got to make sure that the people think what they're hearing about their political system is relevant. If they don't think it's relevant to them, they'll never vote. That is how to tie them in. The tools to be used for communication are important, but we've got to make sure that people think this government is relevant.

I say this with all due respect to everybody in the room who is very involved in it, but you all know and have struggled with this yourselves, I am sure, in terms of debates you are in and some of the issues you deal with. The citizens see an awful lot of what you do; it is all transparent, and they want it to be relevant to their lives. If they don't think it is, nothing will convince them to start to vote.

I say that of all three levels of government, I might add.

● (1225)

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Let me ask you a more pointed question on this. Is the electoral system in Canada part of the problem, or do you think something else is the problem? We'd have to be very careful, wouldn't we, if we recommended changing the electoral system in this country, which I think has worked relatively well—and that is debatable. What is your opinion on that?

Ms. Jodi White: It would appear that people don't feel they are seeing their vote reflected in the House of Commons. I think we all know that from data we've seen, or whatever, so those are issues you will want to look at. However, this will not solve all of the problems. I think I said that in my remarks. This is a multi-faceted issue that will require a lot more in terms of the entire deficit, but on the electoral side, your challenge really is to decide. Do you want to do things to ensure that it will reflect the diversity of the country? Is that the most important thing to you as parliamentarians, or is it just that people's votes are translated directly into the House?

Those kinds of issues are exactly what you've got to delve into first, before you start looking at specific models.

The Chair: I have a brief question myself.

When we had the presentation last week, it became obvious that by having one-third of the seats proportional, you increased the seats by 50% in size and in population.

My question is about rural Canadians. Dr. Seidle, I know you've done some work with the Lortie commission. Is there a concern that rural Canadians would feel even more alienated if each member of Parliament with a constituency represented 50% more people and ridings that were at least 50% larger in land mass? Is there any concern in that regard?

Dr. Leslie Seidle: I think that's certainly a question that would need to be given very serious consideration in any process looking at the federal electoral system.

One of the things happening in this debate is that it's very easy to look at a process that's happened at the provincial level, where there are some distances. In the B.C. assembly, this was quite an important

issue. That's one of the reasons they've recommended fewer members per district in the north and in the interior.

However, to draw too quickly a parallel between what they did in New Zealand or in Scotland with Canada.... When we set our own criteria, our own values, one of them should be the relation between constituents and MPs, whether it's the MPs who might be elected as a single member or might be elected from a list. I'm always referring to the mixed system, because it seems to be the one that has the greatest play at the moment.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Broadbent, there are just a couple of minutes left. I know you wanted to have a second round. Please proceed.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: This may strike you as bizarre, but I don't think I'm going to ask more questions at this point. I want to make the point to our guests and to fellow members of the committee that the mandate before us is to look at the electoral system. I think it's right for us to be cautious in not assuming, if we correct—as many of us think—the present electoral system, that it's not necessarily going to deal with all these other problems. I think it would be intellectually foolish to do that.

Speaking as a member of the committee—and I want to personally turn to some of these people after to get more concrete advice, building on their useful opinions—we simply can't start looking at the role of civil society or democratic reform outside the electoral system if we're going to do an adequate job on the electoral system.

So I'm going to conclude with that and just thank our guests. I will be in touch with each of them with a more specific question.

Thank you.

● (1230)

The Chair: In turn, I want to thank our guests for being here.

I ask all honourable members to remain in the room, because we have to have a meeting right away to set the agenda and adopt another report.

Thank you again to all of our guests—the panellists who have been with us this morning. This has been very insightful.