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The Honourable Don Boudria

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• (1110)

[English]

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

Thank you very much, everyone.

To remind everyone, as I do at most meetings, further to the address and reply to the Speech from the Throne, I'm reading the House order that was passed:

An order of reference to 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.

Of course, that is what we are studying.

[Translation]

Pursuant to the Order of Reference of Thursday November 25, 2004, we resume our study on electoral reform.

[English]

This morning we have two witnesses appearing before committee.

Professor Ken Carty is from the University of British Columbia. Good morning and welcome, Professor.

From the Fraser Institute is someone well known to many of us as well, Mr. Gordon Gibson, senior fellow in Canadian studies. Welcome, Mr. Gibson.

Perhaps one of you would like to start first, with a brief statement. We will then have members of Parliament intervening and asking questions of both witnesses so that we can get as much benefit as possible from what will no doubt be their very worthwhile and interesting contributions.

Professor Carty, would you like to go first?

Prof. Ken Carty (Professor of Political Science, University of British Columbia): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I'm going to take a few minutes to tell you about the citizens' assembly and how it worked because I've been asked to talk about the process. Then I'd be more than happy to answer questions.

I'd like to say a word about its creation. It's fair to say that it was a commitment of a new government, but it's important to remember that this was part of a wider reform package of that government. It included things such as open cabinet meetings, which were instituted, and a fixed election date, which the government passed a bill on. So this has to be seen, I think, as part of a wider context.

The assembly was designed not by the government but by one of British Columbia's most prominent citizens. He sits here to my left. The plan was endorsed by the legislature of British Columbia in an all-party vote. The chairman was nominated by the legislature, and a resolution was passed with unanimous support from all parties in the legislature. Three of the senior staff members were approved by a legislative committee. It was given a budget, and then it was given complete independence. So it was created by the government, with the support of the legislature as a whole, but then given a budget and told to go away and do its work.

The citizens' assembly had a very limited and very focused mandate. I think this was an important part of its activities. It was asked to review the existing electoral system. That was defined quite narrowly; that is, the process by which votes are translated into seats. All the other things around electoral systems, such as party finance, were excluded. So it had a very focused mandate. It was asked to consider the way the system worked and its implications for voters, political parties, the work of the legislature, and the work of the government, and to consider whether there was an alternative system that might be better. If there was a single alternative, it was to recommend it. It was only to recommend one alternative if it wanted a change. That was because as part of the plan, the recommendation of the assembly was going to go directly to the people in a referendum. The idea was that they had to have a specific alternative. They would have to know what they were voting on in a fair amount of detail. So that was the creation and the mandate.

In terms of the composition, it was simply 160 British Columbians chosen at random from the voters list. Active politicians were excluded, but anyone else on the voters list was included. And there was a right to opt out. So people were sent a letter saying they had been drawn at random by the great computer at Elections B.C. and that they had been nominated as a member of the assembly by this process. They were invited to come to a local meeting at which they would learn about the process and get a briefing, and then they could decide whether they wanted to put their name in a hat. It was literally a physical hat, and the names of people were drawn.

The assembly was supported by a relatively small staff, which were appointed by the chairman. There were about six professional and six support staff for the work of the assembly.

After the process of selection was done, I think it's fair to say that the assembly included a representative group of British Columbian electors. The age balance was in fact better than the voters list. It was perfectly balanced in terms of gender—80 men and 80 women. It was regionally balanced because one man and one woman came from every electoral district in the province. But more than that, the random selection process produced an assembly of 160 British Columbians who reflected the social, economic, cultural, ethnic, and educational character of the province.

This really was a representative group of British Columbians in terms of their experience and background and where they came from. About a third of them were born outside of Canada. That's the kind of how it is in British Columbia. About a third of them were born in some other part of the country, and about 40% were born in British Columbia. So they brought a very diverse set of perspectives, precisely the kinds of perspectives voters bring to the ballot box.

Having created and established the assembly, it went through a four-phase program, the first phase having been the selection process. That happened in the fall of 2003. Then there was a so-called learning phase. This involved six residential weekends when all the members were brought to Vancouver. They learned about all kinds of electoral systems and that no two countries in the world choose their parliaments and legislatures by the same mechanism. They learned how electoral systems relate to the basic values of a society and how of course they're connected to the wider constitutional framework of a system. This was really an advanced course in political science in many ways and connecting that to the history and the values of the society.

• (1115)

From that, the assembly moved into a set of public hearings. They were charged to listen to British Columbians across the province. They held 50 public hearings, more than was planned, but that reflected the demand of people to come and speak. They were all well attended. I remember one public hearing in Smithers, B.C., on the night of the Stanley Cup final game when 60 people came out to talk about electoral reform. We had that kind of response all across the province.

There was also a submission process by which members of the public could make submissions to the assembly. By the time they were finished, over 1,600 submissions were made, most of which were done through a web-based process. That itself was quite interesting because as submissions came in on the web, others would read them and think "I don't agree with that", and then they would send in their submission. So the web-based submission process became a kind of public dialogue in itself. It was, I think, a very important and influential process. Members had abstracts of all the submissions. I think a large number of members actually read all 1,600 submissions. They put in an immense amount of work over the summer.

Then they came back in the fall, and there was a six-week deliberation and final decision-making process. They discussed the basic values they wanted to see reflected in the electoral system and how they understood elections from their point of view. They said given those basic values and considerations, what kind of electoral system would satisfy? They then moved to design a couple of

alternatives in a fair amount of detail because they thought that you can't talk about these things in the abstract. If you want to talk about MMP, MMM, STV, or alternative vote, you have to talk about the details of those things and how it would actually work in a real place.

They finally designed two systems in a fair amount of detail. They spent a weekend on each. Then they engaged in a final debate on a comparison of the two. They chose one by about a four-to-one margin. They spent the following period saying, "Is this system we've designed as a potential alternative actually better than the current system? How would it work in our parliamentary system? Do we really want to give up first past the post for this?" They finally decided they did, and they have made a recommendation to the province that it adopt a version of a single transferable system.

I would say the average member of the assembly put in a minimum of 40 days of their life over the year 2004 in meetings, reading and studying, and involvement.

In terms of an assessment, it successfully completed its mandate on target and under budget, as the chairmen want to remind us. It produced a detailed and coherent recommendation. It wasn't unanimous, but it had extraordinarily widespread support across the assembly, near unanimous support.

Over the full year of work, which, as I said, involved at least 40 days, only one member withdrew. Attendance was nearly perfect through the whole process. It engendered a commitment of citizens. It was really quite remarkable. One member came 10 days after triple bypass heart surgery. He didn't want to miss an important decision-making meeting. One member came five days after she had delivered a baby. This was the kind of commitment people put into the process. The members recorded very high levels of satisfaction in their chance to participate as equals.

The final debate has been described by the most well-known political journalist in the province as the most intelligent, respectful, and thoughtful political discussion he has heard in 20 years anywhere.

In many ways it worked. It produced a recommendation. It had widespread support. Why did it work? Why was this particular model successful? I think there are five things one can point to pretty easily. First of all, the random selection process was critical. Members came as unencumbered individuals. In many citizen engagement processes, people come as representing a group, an interest, or a party. These people came as individual voters, many of them with no previous policy commitments, with open minds and prepared to learn, debate, and listen. They were established, I think, as a generally representative group. They understood that they really did represent British Columbia in the small. I think that considerably legitimized their claims to come to some kind of decision.

●(1120)

The second feature that we think was quite important was the gender balance. It's difficult to be precise as to why this perfectly balanced assembly, in terms of gender, was critical. Almost all members think it was. They can't always articulate it, but they believe it certainly created a very distinctive character to debate and deliberation that you don't often see in these kinds of public meetings. They also believe, of course, as the first gender-balanced assembly almost anywhere ever that it enhanced the legitimacy of the exercise, in their eyes and in the wider public's eyes.

The third reason it probably worked is because it had an important task—the electoral system. There are not many things that are more important and central to our democracy than the way we choose those who speak for us and make important policy decisions. But it was focused; it wasn't wide-ranging. I think that importance and focus stimulated them, stimulated a commitment to the mandate and to each other. The limited task kept them together and kept them on target. They knew they were doing something really important for themselves, but not for themselves as individuals. No one was going to get a raise at the end of the year or win a Cadillac, but maybe they were going to make their society and province better. That was a very important thing to do.

The fourth feature that I think was important was their independence. They were completely free from outside influences and interests and they were aware of that. That was important to them, so they didn't think they were somehow being used or this was a kind of token exercise, but secondly, of course, it stimulated much more public interest and public confidence in the process. This wasn't just another kind of exercise.

Finally, it worked probably because the assembly had real power. They weren't making just another report that would sit on a shelf in the library waiting for a history student to discover it 20 years from now. They knew that what they decided would go to the people and the people would decide. It wouldn't get watered down or changed. I think that was quite important to generating the kind of commitment, work, and energy that was realistically necessary, and that provided, really, a very powerful incentive for them to work together and fulfil their mandate.

Finally, let me just make a couple of observations about what we think we learned from observing this process. First of all, I think it's demonstrable that citizens want to contribute to making important decisions for their society. They will put in the time and effort necessary to do that. As I say, these people put in a huge amount of effort and learned about a subject that many of them knew very little about in the beginning, because they thought they were making a contribution to their society. If they had a complaint, it was that they didn't have a chance to do this more often and other citizens didn't have these kinds of opportunities.

Secondly, I think it proved pretty conclusively that ordinary citizens can master complicated subjects. The electoral law is a kind of arcane, complex issue. It is, at one level, very philosophical concepts about representation, but at another level there are lots of i's to dot and t's to cross, as all members will know, and there are hundreds of different electoral systems out there. I'm likely to say that there are as many electoral systems out there as there are

unemployed mathematicians trying to invent another one. Yet these members learned about them and developed very sophisticated knowledge, many of them running computer simulations and doing a good deal of independent research on their own.

This is basic stuff that the citizens can learn. They learned that deliberative decision-making can work. It can be slow, but the kind of respectful give and take and argument about basic values and the kinds of institutions that would articulate them can work. They believe they don't see that in their legislature. They just see kind of warring armies saying, "We're right about everything; you're wrong about everything." They don't see any kind of deliberation, and they believe they have demonstrated in important ways that this kind of process can work to bring people together who start in different places to make a decision.

I think it demonstrated that diverse, multicultural groups can make principled, value-based decisions, because they made decisions that were rooted in debates and discussions about their fundamental underlying values. They reflected the diversity of cultures and backgrounds of British Columbia. Yet that kind of group was able to come together and make a value-based decision and articulate a kind of institutional response to that.

Finally, I think we learned that citizens define problems, and therefore solutions, probably rather differently than the established experts and elites. If you read their report, you see that they define the problem of the electoral system probably differently than political parties or political scientists do. So their take on what they want in the electoral system was probably different.

●(1125)

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor Carty.

Mr. Gibson, you have a statement from yourself, sir, and then members, I'm sure, will have many questions, because this is different from many of the other presentations we have had because of the exercise, which is rather unique, that you've just led.

Mr. Gibson.

Mr. Gordon Gibson (Senior Fellow in Canadian Studies, The Fraser Institute): Mr. Chairman, first of all, it's a pleasure and an honour to be here, and I thank you and the members of the committee for this opportunity.

I can summarize my evidence very quickly in the following two points. This was a very bold experiment by the government and legislature of British Columbia, and it worked. That's point number one.

Point number two, in my opinion, and I'll elaborate on this, is it could be easily adapted to serve the same purpose at the federal level, should there be an interest in doing that.

Let me begin by saying I think there are three basic ways whereby you can design a new electoral system once you decide to start down that road. The first is a panel of experts, and this could be a royal commission or it could be the expert input that the Government of Quebec used in their process, for example.

The second would be a parliamentary committee or some gathering of professional legislators. Of course, mixed committees of experts and legislators have been used in some countries for this kind of purpose.

The third generic route is a panel of citizens. The Government of British Columbia chose the third option, and Ontario apparently is in the process of following the same path. The current Government of British Columbia, of course, promised this in their so-called "New Era" document, their election manifesto for 2001. The platform document was silent on why the Government of British Columbia chose this option among the ones available to them, but if I was able to look behind the scenes and guess about their thinking, I would say, first of all, they believe that a review of the electoral system had to have legitimacy; it had to have credibility. There is a view in the public, at least in British Columbia and perhaps more widely in the country, that expert panels are all very well for some things, but when they're appointed by governments for matters of high political sensitivity, they are not necessarily considered to be impartial. The third option, the one of citizens, is unquestionably legitimate.

I would suggest to you that when you're looking at constitutional questions, and even though it's small "c" rather than large "C", the electoral system is clearly an important part of our Constitution, federally and provincially. When you're looking at change, for that change to be legitimate I think the process matters almost as much as the end results. In other words, how you get there is important.

One of the reasons the Charlottetown accord was defeated, in my opinion, at referendum, in spite of all the work and accommodation that had gone into it, was the process. The process was one as seen by the people of elite accommodation rather than one involving the public more generally, in spite of attempts by Joe Clark and others at the time to do that.

The second option of designing an electoral reform process, namely using legislators or a parliamentary committee, also has a very serious problem, and that is the problem of conflict of interest, a perceived conflict of interest. When politicians design the way in which they get their jobs and keep their jobs, namely the electoral system, this is an inherent conflict of interest. There's nothing about this that you can do; it simply exists. From a strictly technical point of view, there's no question but legislators have that power, and this is the way changes of this kind have been made in the past. Whether in the Canada of today that is any longer an acceptable route, I'm not sure. In any event, the legislature, as Ken Carty said, unanimously

adopted this route, and the faith of the legislature, in my opinion, was well placed. The technique can now be regarded as a proven one.

The legislature and government did one other thing that was essential. They wedded to the idea of a citizen panel the idea of direct access to the people. This meant, in other words, that their recommendation, if it was a recommendation for change, and this was by no means a given, would go unfiltered and exactly as set out by the assembly to the people in a referendum, subject to certain threshold tests. If the recommendation of the citizens' assembly is approved on May 17, then the current government, if re-elected, has promised to implement it.

The effect of this undertaking, as Professor Carty said, is that both the members of the assembly and the public knew from the beginning that this process really mattered. This was not a theoretical abstract exercise. This was something that really mattered. The attendance and the diligence of the members of the assembly in doing their work demonstrated that.

• (1130)

I think in terms of assessing the performance of the assembly, it began with and continued to earn a remarkably high reputation for legitimacy, credibility, and representativeness. It retained an integrity of process and transparency throughout its work. Virtually everything was public. There were discussion groups that were private, but all plenary sessions were public, all documents were public, and so on.

The rules are important in designing these things, in my opinion. The rules of the assembly provided that there could be a decision made by a simple majority. In any event, the decision that was made was made by an overwhelming consensus. The final vote that matched the STV recommendation against the existing system of first past the post was 146 for the new system and only 7 against.

When you think about it, this is an extraordinary level of consensus. I've asked myself whether this is something that came about by accident or whether this is something that normally comes out of this kind of process. I think it's the latter, if you go about it in the way this assembly did. I can't give too much credit to the staff of the assembly for the way they managed the proceedings without in any way managing the outcome.

First of all, the assembly came to an internal agreement on the protocols for dealing with each other. This can be boiled down to the idea that we will deal with each other with respect. We will talk about ideas rather than people. Secondly, they said that before they went any further, they wanted to talk about values and goals. They wanted to try to define what they thought an electoral system should produce in terms of the needs of British Columbia's public policy. Thirdly, they had expert and public input. Finally, they went through an orderly and an agreed decision-making process, which clearly and transparently gave a fair shot to all of the systems.

In fact, the shot was so fair that I well remember the day of the final vote. Professor Carty was one who was tasked from time to time to give explanations on various systems. He gave such a powerful defence of the current system that I came very close to jumping up and shouting "yes, you're right". The point I'm making here is that all of the systems received fair consideration.

There's a remaining big question. What will the public say about all of this? We will know that in a little over a couple of months. We can say without doubt that the process has been very good so far, but of course practical politicians will wait to see if the public validates its usefulness. We won't have long to wait for that.

Let me say a couple of words about when citizens' assemblies might be used, because they can be used for questions other than electoral reform and other topics of democratic reform. It seems to me that any eligible topic must be very important because the assemblies are a big deal. They're expensive and time consuming. They should only be used for issues that for some reason or another can't be resolved and regulated by the regular representative machinery of democracy. That's what parliaments and legislatures are for. You don't very often want to go around them.

There are some other theoretical constraints, but for the purposes of this hearing, it seems to me that electoral reform is clearly a proper use of the assembly technique. I would go further and say that the success of this assembly has demonstrated that this should now be considered as by far the most legitimate way of addressing electoral reform.

On design questions, I'll be brief here, but certain factors are of importance. The mandate is essential. It should be clear and restricted, and unnecessary topics of controversy should be avoided.

For example, the B.C. assembly did not consider such questions as campaign finance, reserved seats for women or aboriginals, boundaries, compulsory voting, size of the legislature, and so forth. All of these are interesting and important questions, but they were all ruled out in favour of a single, focused mandate. The others can be considered in their own ways in their own time.

Some constraints on the output are essential. In my view, an assembly must be asked to come up with a very detailed recommendation. We have experience in British Columbia that outlines why this should be the case.

In the election of 1991, there were two referendum questions on the ballot asking if the people of British Columbia wanted initiative and recall legislation introduced. It was an overwhelming yes vote of 83%, as I recall. But because there was no precision whatsoever to the referendum question, and it was simply that they would like something like that, there was in fact a lot of foot dragging on bringing in any legislation. What was finally brought in was unworkable.

• (1135)

So precision in the recommendation of assemblies is important. And again, in my opinion, voters should be given a single choice, not a menu of options.

The random selection technique worked very well. There are of course other techniques, such as the Estates General approach, which Quebec has used in the past.

A competent, neutral chair and staff are essential, though the B.C. experience has developed a certain number of protocols, which will make it easier for future assemblies to work well simply by following these procedures.

Finally, the empowering link to a referendum is an indispensable factor for the assembly to be taken seriously. Anything else is simply a large focus group—nothing more—not only for the public, but crucially, also for the members themselves.

Could this device be used federally? I believe it could, if you so wished. There would have to be a very important change in decision-making rules, however. In my opinion, any federal assembly should be required, in making its decisions, to have a majority using the "seven and fifty" formula of the constitutional amendment, and also the regional veto approval, which Parliament adopted in 1995. Mirroring that, for any referendum a federal assembly could put a question on, you have to have the same kind of constitutional approval thresholds for such reform to be considered.

Is now the time? There is very considerable reform activity among the provinces. Some say this reflects the spirit of an age that should now be recognized and copied by the federal Parliament. There is also the argument that regional strains and representational anomalies make the case for reform more urgent at the national level than in the provinces. The contrary argument is based on the "laboratory of federalism" approach. This is a very important change; maybe it would be better to wait and see how the change works out in other parts of the federation. That is a political decision for you to make.

There are many other aspects of democratic reform that you will want to consider in addition to electoral reform. There is parliamentary reform, Senate reform, Supreme Court appointments, and so on. You have to balance all of these things and decide what the timing should be.

So in summary, Mr. Chairman, my advice is that if you do want to get into electoral reform, a citizens' assembly works and is the best way to do it.

Thank you.

• (1140)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Gibson.

[Translation]

Mr. Reid, you have five minutes.

[English]

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Thank you very much to both of you. Your enthusiasm is infectious.

I had a whole series of questions marked down, but I'll start with one that was prompted by almost the very last thing you said, Mr. Gibson, regarding the adoption of some form of regional veto, both in the referendum and presumably in the citizens' assembly itself, over what we come up with.

One of the things that is very different between discussing this in a province, even a very large province like B.C., and a country like Canada is that I think everybody accepts as a ground rule that you are not talking about one system applying to the whole country. That is, you won't ever get an MP who is elected partly in Prince Edward Island and partly in New Brunswick; we'll all be representing one province. That raises a possibility that has been used in some countries for their upper houses. For example, it's still used in Switzerland today, where each province effectively, or each canton in their case, may have a different system.

What I'm thinking of here is, given the fact that Prince Edward Island is such a different place in electoral terms, with only four MPs, from a large place like Ontario or Quebec—where you could have a much more proportional system—ought there not to be some flexibility perhaps allowing for electoral reform to occur in one or more provinces, even if some provinces would prefer to stick with some version of the status quo? Is it necessary to have a one-size-fits-all system from province to province in electing MPs?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: If that's a constitutional question, I'm not sure. You would be better on that than I am.

As a practical matter, I would worry somewhat that you might have a situation where there would be considered to be different classes of members of Parliament.

Ken, you may know of places in the world where this is done.

Prof. Ken Carty: I can't think of any off the top of my head.

There are the kinds of examples you suggested, of upper houses and so on. We actually had proposals of that sort come to the assembly, that different parts of the province might actually use different kinds of systems, and some of the real enthusiasts had different schemes for rural areas and urban areas and so on. The members of the assembly weren't very keen on that, I don't think.

I think there are enough strains in this federation that having its national Parliament elected by quite different principles would probably not be a good thing. As it is, there's a good deal of difference in terms of the numbers of Canadians members represent because of the Constitution, and this is certainly a sore point among the public. I was on the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission in British Columbia, and we heard endlessly about the unfairness of having to make the rural districts in British Columbia so large when even the urban districts in Prince Edward Island were so small. People are aware of these kinds of things. You'd want to think long and hard before going down that road, using different kinds of systems.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's a good answer. That probably does answer the question, and I have some sympathy with those feelings. Before redistribution I represented a riding that both was physically larger than P.E.I. and had more people than P.E.I., and of course they get four MPs plus four senators. People in Lanark—Carleton got me.

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): They were the winners.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's right.

You mentioned the whole thing was done under budget. First of all, what was the budget? I don't know if you've given any thought to this, but realistically, what kind of budget do you think we could

manage nationally in order to get enough meetings that a genuine group dynamic would be felt, given the problems of transporting people long distances? You presumably would have to have larger numbers of people. I don't know if you've thought this out. Would it be one person per constituency? With respect to some of those problems that relate to drawing people from a wide area...I'll just throw it back and ask what kind of response you'd have in a very general sense.

•(1145)

Prof. Ken Carty: Well, the budget for the British Columbia exercise was \$5.5 million from beginning to end, and we came in a little under budget, although we used some of that at the end to send the report to every household in the province to make sure it was widely distributed.

The assembly in British Columbia brought people together in a series of weekends. Every second weekend they came to Vancouver for all day Saturday and a good part of Sunday.

I'm not sure how feasible that would be nationally. I think it would have to be organized rather differently. You'd have to operate in at least the two official languages. It would depend on where you'd locate it. One possibility might be to have regional assemblies building up to a national one. You'd want to think it through. Both the language and the geography of the country would make it organizationally rather different, and I think it would be a hard thing to do.

I don't know whether you've thought about it, Gordon.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: Well, I have, somewhat, and I'll differ a little bit in my advice. I would advise against having regional assemblies building up to a final one because I'm afraid what you would have there would be the development of opposed points of view. In the British Columbia assembly great pains were taken through organizational means, by rotating the membership of discussion groups and so on, to try to avoid the early development of cliques or assemblies of interest.

If you were going to do this nationally, I think you would be best advised to follow the British Columbia model of having everybody meet together for what Professor Carty referred to as the educational phase. How many people? A hundred and sixty seemed to work very well in British Columbia. If you wanted to do that federally, presumably what you would do is break the country down into four-riding sets and then perhaps take one man and one woman from that four-riding group. That would be one way of doing it. Then you could have one person from each riding. Three hundred-and-some members in an assembly starts to be a lot, I think, but I would like to think about that further.

In terms of cost, I wouldn't even want to hazard a guess, except to say that whatever it was, it would really not be consequential when compared to the importance of the subject being discussed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Guimond.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, sirs, for coming here this morning. My questions are directed primarily to Mr. Gibson.

I last met with you either in 1996 or 1997 at the British Columbia Legislature when I was a member of a delegation from the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. You were your party's House leader, whip and caucus chair. I believe you were the only representative of your party sitting in the BC legislature during those years. I appreciated the discussions that we had. You had a reputation of being very knowledgeable about Quebec. I'll put my questions to you right away, to give you more time to respond.

You spoke of three general ways of holding consultations. You mentioned panels of experts and alluded to Quebec's experience. Were you alluding in particular to the Bélanger-Campeau Commission established by Premier Bourassa in 1990-1991 or to the regional sovereignty commissions created by Premier Parizeau prior to the 1995 referendum? What exactly were you referring to when you spoke of the Quebec experience?

Secondly, you spoke of holding consultations via parliamentary committees, an approach that you do not favour. It just so happens that I agree with you on that score. You write that some countries have resorted to having joint parliamentary committees do consultations. Which countries have opted for this approach?

Thirdly, Mr. Campbell of the Liberal Party - I believe the Liberal Party is in power in British Columbia — pledged during the 2001 election campaign in the province to appoint a citizens' assembly. Some of the specifics of this proposal escape me, but nevertheless, can you tell me what the criteria were for appointment to this assembly? Further along in your text, you state that if this option is retained, and it's your preferred option, appointees should be randomly selected. Could you be more specific?

My last question is not relevant to our mandate, but I have already asked it on several occasions. Has there been any discussion of lowering the voting age to 16 years? Perhaps Mr. Carty could answer that question. There has been some discussion about changing the voting process as such. However, has there been any talk of lowering the voting age to 16 or 17 years?

• (1150)

[English]

Mr. Gordon Gibson: Thank you.

The year in which I was leader, whip, chief strategist, and so on for my party, because I was the only caucus member, was in 1976. In 1996 I was no longer there.

The Quebec experience to which I referred was the one that we have just seen where Mr. Massicotte and his colleagues were the

expert advisers who gave input to the office of Mr. Dupuis. I was not thinking of Bélanger-Campeau. The Bélanger commission, the Estates General, could be taken as a partial model, but that, for one reason or another, took place in rather hurried circumstances just before an election, as you will recall.

As for instances in which a mixed politician and expert committee has been used, I would cite one in Canada. You may recall what was called the Fox committee—Wally Fox in Manitoba—which did work on the constitutional process in the early 1990s.

As to what the criteria for appointing members of the assembly were, I think this is a good and important question. Why were they chosen at random? The other theoretical way of choosing members of a citizens' assembly would be to elect them. This has been done in so-called constituent assemblies to write constitutions in some parts of the world. I think it's fair to say that the government's mind was open on this question, although there was an internal preference for randomness. And after some discussion it became very clear why this was the right thing to do, at least in British Columbia.

British Columbia is a highly polarized province—politically partisan feelings are very strong. Had there been an election to choose members of the citizens' assembly, in my opinion, that election would very quickly have turned into a referendum on the government of the day, with questions of whether this particular assembly member candidate was a New Democrat or a Liberal. There would have been a lot of partisan aspects mixed in, and the whole hope of this assembly was to have it be an objective and non-partisan body, so the random selection seemed the best way to do that.

The final question I think was for Ken.

Prof. Ken Carty: You asked about voting age. There was no discussion about that; it was outside their mandate. There was a lot of concern expressed in the assembly and in all the public hearings about voter turnout falling. Canadians are very worried about that, and often assembly members asked in these hearings what people thought about compulsory voting, as there is in Australia. I can tell you that if 50 public hearings are any measure, there's no appetite for compulsory voting at all.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Maintenant, Monsieur Broadbent.

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

As both our witnesses know today, at one point I was a very strong fan of the whole B.C. process. I've since evolved to have some critical concerns I'd like to get your response to, and maybe you'll persuade me back.

Professor Carty, you mentioned, for example, that one of the reasons why this process worked or was a success was that members came as "unencumbered individuals". I'll make the following comment, and then I'd like your response to it.

First of all, none of us is an unencumbered individual. We come laden with a whole set of values, and even if we weren't active members of any political party, we grew up in families, and if we look at normal voting tendencies we see we sort of acquire political tendencies, as others, with our mother's milk. None of us is an unencumbered individual.

Second, the particular concern I have, and it's the opposite to what I thought was a virtue originally, is the exclusion of people with political experience in the citizens' assembly. Not only were active politicians excluded, but anyone, as I recall, going back two elections who had active political experience was also excluded. My point is this seems to me a little like designing a health care system without asking the participation of doctors and nurses, which, in that case, would be a serious mistake. Therefore, I think it's a mistake, and that's what I want you to comment on.

I think what you see as a central virtue, and I originally saw as a central virtue, is in fact a major vice in having a body that is going to be not just expressing an opinion on values that they want to see reflected, say, in a voting system, but is actually going to propose in detail an electoral system. The absence of men and women who have had some kind of political participation in this process, in designing a system, is a serious handicap.

Again, there is no precedent for this anywhere in the world. Once I saw this as a virtue of the B.C. process too. We heard from other witnesses yesterday saying that in Europe and Asia and elsewhere, something like 90% of reforms that have gone on in modern democracies have been undertaken by legislatures, not by a citizens' assembly. The view was expressed that this is not accidental, because legislatures actually know something about the political process—the role of political parties and how institutions actually function.

That's a long observation, and I'd like both of you, who were seriously engaged in your own process, to respond to it.

• (1155)

Prof. Ken Carty: Fair enough, Mr. Broadbent.

When I said they came as unencumbered individuals, of course they came with their own values and experience in the world as voters and citizens. What I meant, in some sense, was that they didn't come as representatives of specific interest groups charged with pushing that line. We know that in most public hearing processes that's who we hear from. People come from this group or that group and they have a line and they're kind of committed to it. They came, in some sense, open to being persuaded, and in that sense it was quite distinctive.

That it was just like designing a medical system without consulting the doctors...well, without commenting on the state of the medical system now, I suppose if you want to reverse the analogy, maybe this was designing a medical system by consulting the patients. I won't push with you—

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Exclusivity is the point, though. It is excluding one group.

Prof. Ken Carty: Yes, I understand that, and we probably shouldn't push these metaphors too far. Politicians were excluded by the rules of the game, which the assembly inherited. Mr. Gibson can

talk about that. I suspect part of it was the government's decision on what he has described as the so-called conflict of interest philosophy.

Certainly people who had been actively engaged in politics earlier than two elections ago might well have been drawn. Politicians could have submitted briefs. One or two people who had been politically active, did; most did not. They could have come to any of the public hearings in their own communities. I don't recall any elected politician or former politician doing that.

When the assembly decided they wanted to hear a representative speaking to each of the existing systems, they invited a former minister in Bill Bennett's government to speak to the virtues of the current system, a minister who had been one of the most powerful ministers in that government for many years. He came and spoke to it.

Had there been four or five people, perhaps, in an assembly of this size, who were members of legislatures, I think it would have been very difficult for them not to come to easily dominate it. They would have said, we know, we've been there, this is how it really works. Ordinary citizens, in some sense, tend to defer to the people they've elected in this kind of thing.

I think it would have been difficult to operate. Maybe in a group this large it wouldn't have. These were 160 people who could not be led.

• (1200)

The Chair: We'll have to go to the next question, and we'll come back, perhaps, Mr. Broadbent.

Madame Boivin, s'il vous plaît.

[Translation]

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, Lib.): Thank you for being here. This is proving to be an interesting discussion.

I'd like to hear your views on the reasons for wanting to create this citizens' assembly. If I understood correctly, this was an election promise. I approve of citizens participating in the process, but I'm concerned by the following statement you made in your document, Mr. Gibson:

The mandate is central. It should be clear and restricted. Unnecessary topics should be avoided. For example, the B.C. Assembly did not consider such questions as campaign finance, boundaries, reserved seats for women or aboriginals, compulsory voting, size of the Legislature, and so on.

In my view, any discussion about a future electoral system must not set aside such important considerations. Would this not skewer the findings, in that the focus would be restricted to a number of possible electoral systems which would then be presented to voters for their endorsement? When I look at the two options in the running to replace the existing system and the one ultimately selected, I have to ask myself one question. I have to wonder if those who participated in the process asked themselves the very same question. Do you think this approach will solve the problem we're seeing in British Columbia, Quebec and elsewhere in Canada, namely the public's disengagement from politics? People feel very disconnected from their political representatives. They have the impression that their vote doesn't matter. Do you feel that the option retained and the approach employed address all of these questions? I for one seriously doubt that they do.

[English]

Mr. Gordon Gibson: As I understood it, there are three general lines of questioning here.

First of all, what led to the creation of the assembly? I would have to be able to read Premier Campbell's mind to answer that definitively, but very clearly, in 1996 we had an election where the Liberal Party won more votes than the New Democrats and yet considerably fewer seats. This of course is something that makes an impression on a politician. In 2001 the Liberal Party got about 58% of the vote but about 97% of the seats. This made an impression on all the people of the province.

In British Columbia there had already been for some years agitation for various kinds of democratic reform, so this idea had been on the table during the nineties. Mr. Campbell obviously adopted it some time around 1998 when it began to be noticed in the party platform.

Second, why exclude important issues such as campaign finance, and so on?

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Do you consider them to be important? The translation says "non-important issues".

Mr. Gordon Gibson: Oh no, I certainly consider those to be very important issues.

There were a couple of reasons for exclusion. First, this was the first use of such a device ever, at least back to the time of ancient Athens. So we weren't sure how it was going to work, and we thought it would be better to not overburden this group with too many things, and keep it as simple as possible.

The second reason was the possibility of seriously compromising the ability to get one reform by introducing another unnecessary topic. For example, had the assembly had the power and ability to recommend the increase in the size of the legislature—which might have solved some problems for them—I'm virtually certain that would have led to a definite rejection at referendum. People would have said they didn't want any more politicians.

• (1205)

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Then are you satisfied that the solution is going to fix the problem?

[Translation]

The Chair: I'm afraid your time is up, Ms. Boivin. I'll allow Mr. Gibson to answer your question, but that will be all.

[English]

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: Will the system fix the problem? I defer to my political science colleague.

Prof. Ken Carty: I think the members believe it will address more powerfully the problems as they define them—increasing voter choice, generating a more responsible set of politicians because of the transferable vote in multi-member districts—and provide for proportionality. They defined the problems of the electoral system as not the kinds of choices they wanted to see on their ballot; not the kinds of outcomes that reflected the way they voted; and not the kind of connection to their politicians they wanted as local representatives. They saw this as the system that was best designed to address those three problems.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Hill.

Mr. Jay Hill: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I apologize for being late, gentlemen. Welcome to the committee.

I've got a comment, I guess, and then I'll ask a couple of questions. My comment really takes us back to Mr. Reid's questions about whether it would be possible or feasible, or should it be feasible, to have a different electoral system in some areas, regions, or provinces of the country because of the anomalies. All of us are very familiar with the anomaly of Prince Edward Island. There should be some way to address that, if we're going to make constitutional changes. So I don't think the status quo, if we're looking at change, is acceptable in that light. I think we've got to look broader than that.

I was interested in your comment, Mr. Gibson, that you would be opposed to that because you felt it would create different classes of members of Parliament. I think that's the term you used. Well, in running around my huge riding of Prince George—Peace River, which takes up all of northeastern British Columbia, I haven't found a lot of support for this plan—I'll say that right up front—other than from the people who served on the assembly and a few family members around them.

One reason is because it's complicated, in the sense that it's very difficult to explain. I've talked to people who, like myself, have taken the time to try to read the material you've sent out, and they had difficulty understanding where we're going with this and what the rationale is—the ultimate end game of it. When you deal with multiple-member districts, that's where they get hung up. How is it possible that you're not creating different classes of MLAs when our big rural district has two and an urban one has seven? That's where they have some problems. Right now, whether you like it or not, they view the system as being equitable.

So as a first step, why wouldn't the assembly at least recommend a single transferable vote or a single transferable ballot, just with the existing system, to allow the population to become more comfortable? Secondly, on this system of multiple members, can you explain to me and the committee how that wouldn't create at least the potential for different classes of MLAs—and likewise at the federal level?

Prof. Ken Carty: First, let me say that there's a long history of multi-member districts in British Columbia. In fact, I served on the Fisher commission that abolished them, and they were only finally abolished in British Columbia in the early 1990s.

On the question about whether the members would be different, you can't have proportional results without multi-member districts of some kind.

The Chair: That sounds like a challenge, gentlemen.

• (1210)

Mr. Jay Hill: Why?

Prof. Ken Carty: Because in a single-member district, only one party can win. Whether they get 5% of the vote or 95% of the vote, the one with the most gets 100% of the seats. If the seats are to be shared in a proportional way, you have to go to a system in which there is more than one person elected from an area. It can be as large as the whole country. In Israel or the Netherlands, for instance, the whole country is one big district. Or they can be regional districts or smaller.

I think the assembly was attracted to the single transferable vote because it allowed for relatively modest-sized districts, with some variation so that the districts could be a little bit bigger in urban areas in terms of numbers of members, but not physically bigger. They could also be kept a little bit more reasonable in rural areas, in that they're going to be about the size of federal districts. In some sense, the assembly also actually wanted to avoid the "two classes of member" system that was likely to be an outcome if it opted for the other kind of proportional system that was popular, the so-called mixed-member system, because they would have some members elected from party lists and some members actually elected in constituencies. They said they didn't actually like that. In fact, I think the northerners were the strongest members in resisting that kind of thing, because it would have reduced the number of districts in the northern part of the province even more.

The members like the single transferable vote because they think it gives them more connection to their members. The reality is that in a four-member district, for instance, a party with half the vote is going to win two of those seats, but it might well nominate three candidates or four candidates. In some sense, then, the voters are going to get to decide which of the candidates they want from the party. In some sense, those candidates are going to have to be more attentive to their members and more responsive to their members, as the experience suggests in other cases. The voters will in fact be making more of those kinds of choices.

Under the current system, if you like a candidate in one party but you like another party, you're forced to choose. This allows voters to say they like a certain person best, but that they think another person is really quite good too, so they're going to give that second person their second preference. If their first preference doesn't get elected,

they're told it's too bad for them, they have to wait four more years and then they'll be allowed to look at their second preference. I think that's basically why the assembly members opted for that system. That's my reading of their debate.

The Chair: Mr. Gibson, did you want to add to this?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: No, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: I have a question I want to ask. Was it part of your mandate...? Even if it wasn't, do you have any thoughts on the principle of attacking all of this idea of democratic reform by way of officializing the party nomination processes to make them democratic at the grassroots level? Some could call that a form of primary that exists, recognizing that it exists in about a million different ways in the fifty states across the way. No two of them are alike, or at least there are not very many of them that are identical. They have various forms of official, quasi-official, and non-official ones within the same country in the United States.

Was that examined in any way? Should it be?

Prof. Ken Carty: It was discussed a fair amount. As you will probably know, Mr. Chairman, the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy has made a number of very detailed recommendations precisely of that sort because they believed that was an important part of the process.

One of the advantages that assembly members talked about in regard to the single transferable vote was that this in effect would make elections both elections and primary-like choices, because the voters would get to choose amongst the various candidates that a party put up. That would help to involve voters at that stage.

Certainly in the discussions about the mixed-member systems, where there was to be a party list, one of the things voters were not very happy about was the notion that the party lists would be created often in the way that some of our party nominations are: in back rooms, by decisions by leaders, and so on. So I think there is a considerable appetite for opening up that process, for engaging the public in some way, but it has to do with the internal affairs of parties, which are beyond the mandate of the assembly, so it wasn't directly addressed. But I think some assembly members—and certainly they spoke this way in their debate—saw that one of the advantages of the single transferrable vote is that it helps to incorporate that very part of the process.

The Chair: Mr. Gibson, do you have any opinions on this?

Mr. Gordon Gibson: Simply the philosophical one, to agree with the implication of your question, that in looking at democratic reform, the internal operations of the political parties are tremendously important and leave room for a good deal of examination.

The Chair: The reason I raise it is because I don't think there's much doubt that the voter likes partisan MPs. That's what they vote for all the time. We have one independent and 307 partisans who were elected in the last election. There is at least some appetite for that particular variety of MP. If we talk about the process in abstraction of the party choosing the candidates, are we doing the exercise total service? I think you're saying no, it has to be part of it, or should be.

• (1215)

Mr. Gordon Gibson: On the other hand, to come back to what Professor Carty said, the STV system is, in part, a transfer of some of the political decision-making of parties from the party apparatus to the public, rather like the primary system in the United States. That answers part of that question, I think.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Reid, your turn again. You've asked for another round.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, please.

You made a comment that I wanted to come back to, Mr. Carty. You said proportionality is only possible in multi-member districts. Some of the really egregious problems that occur... I was the beneficiary of one of those. I was elected in Ontario in 2000 with 38% of the vote. My Liberal opponent had 36% of the vote, so I wound up becoming the member of Parliament, even though over 60% of voters cast their ballots for somebody else.

That kind of problem can be overcome without going to multi-member districts if you adopt the system used for the Australian lower house. In the Australian House of Representatives, of course, you have single-member districts. Individual members of Parliament are elected through a system of indicating preferences. As a person drops off the ballot, their votes are redistributed until someone gets more than 50% of the vote. At that point, the counting stops.

I was nominated by that system in the same riding. Whereas I was on one pole of the spectrum of candidates in the election itself, I was the centrist candidate for the nomination, which is why I won. I was the least offensive to the greatest number of people. I've since expanded on my reputation for inoffensiveness in the House.

The Chair: Pretty inoffensive.

Mr. Scott Reid: It seems to me that this is something that does at least deal with a part of the problem. I have two thoughts I wanted to bring up. If Canada were to go, as the Law Reform Commission recommends, to some system of members elected in single-member districts, and then rejigging of proportionality through list candidates, they're still talking about first past the post in those ridings, as opposed to some form of list where you indicate your preferences. And that seems to me to be a problem. Also in Canada, no matter what we do, we're going to have at least three districts in our three territories that are going to be single-member districts. Throwing all of that out, I'm asking for some commentary on a system that I've heard almost no commentary on at all in our debate so far, which is the single-member system used in the Australian lower house.

Prof. Ken Carty: We have good experience with that, of course, because we had that in British Columbia in 1952 and 1953 and got Social Credit for half a century out of that.

Mr. Scott Reid: In all fairness, there were elections after 1952 and 1953.

Prof. Ken Carty: And they promptly changed it back. That system is essentially a majoritarian system, and in its fundamental principles, in terms of distributing outcomes, it doesn't work that much differently than the plurality first past the post system. In fact, it's probably even harder on small parties, because small parties, or minor parties, can often have areas where they are strong. In that kind of system they tend to get beaten up almost everywhere and get squeezed out. It's not a proportional system, basically.

So if you're interested in moving to a proportional system, which simply means that the vote shares ought to look something like the seat shares—no system is perfectly proportional, it's a continuum—then you can't go in that direction. In fact, the assembly decided it wanted some proportionality, and that ruled out those kinds of systems, and it also ruled out the French system, which works the same way only by having successive Sundays. It also wanted some strong local representation, and that ruled out the kind of list systems of proportionality that are used in many of the smaller western European countries, because they don't provide for the kind of local representation Canadians want.

Does that answer your question, Mr. Reid?

• (1220)

The Chair: You have time for another, Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: We would be left with at least some first past the post seats, in practice, in a country like Canada. The three territories would have some first past the post seats.

As opposed to a question, I'll make a little editorial here. The Yukon, for example, tends to get a three-way split over and over again. The result is that whatever rotation occurs, 1% or 2% of voters shift. You go from one party to another. I personally think there would be a case, in ridings like that at any rate, to look at some system like the Australian one. Perhaps I should ask your comment on those exceptional cases. Even there, do you think it's not a good idea?

Prof. Ken Carty: Certainly, electoral reform in this country is going to be difficult. You have the three northern territories and you have Prince Edward Island. The Law Commission of Canada says they want MMP in P.E.I., but they want three list seats and one regular seat. That's four single seats.

The Chair: It's the same, isn't it?

Prof. Ken Carty: Yes, it's very difficult. That's actually a creative solution. We said we wanted some kind of proportionality, but we can't have it in those kinds of areas. Maybe in the very smallest areas we're going to have to say, look, we want to provide some mechanism. Maybe alternate vote is the best thing you could do in those areas.

The Chair: Mr. Broadbent, the final question, please.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: The problem I have with the recommendation—and I'd like each of you to comment on it—is that the model the assembly has come up with is, as you know, shared by Ireland and Malta only. The vast majority of democracies, including the new democracies that have chosen the new systems, excluded that. One of the reasons, I would think, is the virtue that both of you see in it, in that it gives individual voters more control over individuals because party members are in competition with each other. Not only would Liberals be competing with New Democrats and Conservatives and the Bloc, for example, they'd be competing with each other in the same districts.

For some of us, including some Europeans whom I've talked about who had a look at the possibility of the Irish system, this introduces a system that makes the parties less accountable for their own programs. It turns MPs, or potential MPs, into people who are running constantly as individuals against each other. It undercuts party responsibility that, by the way, could be maximized by other reforms about the structure and election of candidates. I'm not excluding that. This is a side of ultimate individualism analogous to more municipal governments we have, giving so much control to voters over individuals that it discounts the value pretty entirely of political parties. I would suggest that a lot of us wouldn't want to run in that system. It's competitive enough to run against other parties without spending your whole life running against members in your own party, publicly. Perhaps this is one reason why none of the new democracies in eastern Europe, for example, adopted the Irish system. The Irish got it in the 1920s with their constitution and have had two referendums to try to get rid of it, but the citizens do like it. I understand that a lot of parties there don't like it.

Comment on all that, if you would.

Prof. Ken Carty: It's also widely used in Australia in most of the upper houses and in the lower house in one of the states. There's a strong labour versus liberal two-party system there. It doesn't do away with strong parties.

It may well change the nature of the caucuses of parties. It may well, in fact, make the parties and some of their decision-making more open to their caucuses. It's probably a little bit harder on party leaders. They're going to have party caucus members who are going to say, look, I'm sorry, this won't wash in my district, and I have to get re-elected.

• (1225)

Hon. Ed Broadbent: No, but you don't have a common program.

Prof. Ken Carty: No. The common program evolves, in some sense, more out of the more equal interaction of all the caucus members. I suspect it may be harder on party leaders, somehow. They can't just say, this is the law, so show up and vote. They have to be more responsive, in some sense, to their own members and to

their own caucuses. Party discipline evolves out of a collective decision.

I can tell you that Fianna Fail, the party that has governed Ireland since the 1930s, is one of the most disciplined, tough political parties in the world. The caucus reflects their supporters and they work it out. There is nothing undisciplined about the Labor Party in Australia. Their internal working has probably changed. They probably are more responsive to their supporters and they probably have to build internal accommodations in different ways.

Mr. Gordon Gibson: It seems to me, speaking in supplement to that, the primary duty of an electoral system is surely to the owners, the electors themselves. If that creates an inconvenience for politicians as compared with the current system, so be it. It is the owners who are entitled to pride of place here.

Would there be a lack of candidates? There is no lack of candidates in Ireland.

This allows me a chance to come back to your earlier observation, that 90% of the electoral systems in the world are defined by politicians, and that's true. I would suggest that is why STV is so rare in the world. Politicians would naturally see STV as transferring some powers that they are used to exercising—particularly the leaders of political parties—into the hands of the ordinary voter, and also somewhat reducing the ability of the party whip in any given party to control a given member, because one of the characteristics of STV is that it allows the election of independents. Any given member who is representing strongly the attitude of his district and is opposed to the party line on any given issue can credibly say, "I simply can't go with you on this one, and if you kick me out of the party, I can be re-elected as an independent. I hope it doesn't come to that." It changes the balance of power in important ways that some politicians would not approve of.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Gibson.

I'd like to end by thanking our witnesses.

Please, members, stay for a little while. We need to do a little bit of agenda work for a couple of minutes before we leave to go wherever we're going.

Meanwhile, let me take the opportunity to thank our witnesses, Professor Ken Carty and Mr. Gordon Gibson, whom I've known for a long time. It's been a pleasure to see both of you. Thank you for attending our committee today to enlighten us with this real-life experience that both of you have shared, and I guess to a degree are still sharing until the baby is born, if it is, a few weeks down the road. Thank you very much.

Colleagues, I will just ask you for a couple of things briefly. There are things I won't even put before you today, because there's not a very large turnout of the committee at this point, but maybe we could do this quickly.

There are two items that are rather urgent for us. One is that we have the estimates. The main estimates for 2005-06 are before us. I think of our committee as being essentially the committee that sets the example to the others in terms of following parliamentary procedure, so I certainly think we should take one meeting at least to go through those. If you want to do that during the week while we're back shortly, that's up to you.

Second, we've been asked to contribute to the order in council process. As you know, on behalf of this committee I wrote to all other committee chairs. A report was prepared by Mr. James Robertson. We can circulate it right now; I think it is ready to be circulated. Members could have a look at it, and maybe at our next meeting that should probably be the item we would do. We need to give our input on how to review order in council appointments.

Please remember that when we come back it will be in a four-day week. In a four-day week I really would want to have a meeting on that Thursday, but I wasn't born yesterday either. I know it will probably end up not happening, even though we may want it. We may only have one meeting, on the Tuesday.

Would you be interested in doing either the prior review of appointments—the summaries and options—or the estimates? Probably the review of appointments could be dealt with in a way that requires a bit less preparation. Because we're all going back to our ridings, would you want to do that on that day? If there is an appetite, maybe we could dispose of that item and recommend to the House leader how we see this proceeding. Then, of course, our researcher would have to prepare a report for us to table after that. Would you be interested in doing that and maybe putting the estimates...?

When do we have to report the estimates?

• (1230)

Mr. Pierre Rodrigue (Clerk of the Committee, Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs): At the end of May.

The Chair: Okay. We can do that when we come back after the break then.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Could we do them both at the same time, at the same meeting?

The Chair: At one meeting do the review of order in council appointments and the entire estimates? I don't pretend to be speaking on behalf of everybody here, but I don't think there would be much of an appetite for that. I think the prior review of appointments is probably going to take our next meeting.

Do you want to do that next time? Is that okay?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Concerning anyone else who wants to testify before us, let's wait until our visits are over; then we'll decide, based on what we've seen, whether we need to hear more witnesses. Does that

make sense? Let's not forget we won't have very much time to prepare a report.

On the issue of the preparation of our report, you had something, which you mentioned to me informally earlier, Mr. Reid. Do you want to say that now?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. We're trying to decide not on the system for Canada but on the system for choosing Canada's system. One of the models before us is the citizens' assembly in British Columbia. Their referendum is on May 17, and we are currently scheduled to prepare our report before they have had their referendum, which could very well be an instructive experience for us.

So I think there might be some merit to moving back our date somewhat so that we can have fully seen the experience of and the debate that occurs during the final days of that referendum. Of course, referendum debates, as we all know, tend to produce the fullest supply of discussion right before the final day of the vote, and I think we would deprive ourselves of that. So it's my informal suggestion that we should consider moving back our report dates to after May 17.

The Chair: Why don't we just take this suggestion as something to think about as we visit, and maybe when we come back, look at it again? Please remember that the date we have is an order that we have accepted for ourselves. I believe it was a motion by Mr. Broadbent that we adopt it as our target date. Of course, if we want to change it, we're certainly free to do that, but I think it would be a little quick to decide on that this morning, in any case.

But, Mr. Broadbent, given that it was your motion—

Hon. Ed Broadbent: I accept your suggestion that we don't need to make a final decision on this at all, that we could think about it until we get back. But I have two quick observations.

One is that whatever the vote on the referendum is, it has nothing to do with the process, if I can put it that way. We've seen the process, so all we're waiting for is the outcome of that vote. That's a preliminary reaction.

The other is that the date I did propose was not, of course, accidental. I thought it was doable in terms of our time and looking at the options of the process—and I agree that we're looking at process—but that date would mean that the government has to respond before it comes back in the fall. With a new four months' time.... If we get it out by April 22 or 23, then the government has to respond—and I'm being candid here and not secretive—and that would mean that sometime in August, whether or not Parliament is here, the government has to say how it plans to respond. It would mean, it seems to me, that it could not ignore starting on whatever process we recommend in September or in the fall when Parliament comes back. So if we delay it beyond the end of April, then we run into the possibility of quite a delay in terms of government response.

The Chair: I think we have enough to think about here for a little while.

Mr. Reid, maybe when we come back we can revisit all this, but on the other hand, we're not recommending yet. The order that's before us is, what system do we need to consult Canadians? It's not, what kind of voting system will we have in the end? That's a long way off.

Mr. Reid has moved that the meeting be adjourned.

We are adjourned.

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