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Chair

Mr. Gary Carr

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•(1635)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gary Carr (Halton, Lib.)): In the interests of time, we'll begin now, if we may.

Most of you know the order of business here. We wanted to have the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Finance appear to give us a bit of an update on the fiscal situation on some of the private members' bills.

With that, I'll turn it over to Mr. McKay, the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Finance.

Hon. John McKay (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance): Thank you.

My basic point here is that we want to have a slightly different system in private members' bills when a bill is going to have an impact on fiscal framework. Right now we're in a situation where there are somewhere in the order of 20 private members' bills that would hit on the fiscal framework, if they received royal assent, something to the tune of \$2 billion.

This really destabilizes the whole way in which government goes about the business of raising its revenues and what revenues it can expect. When you reduce a revenue of some kind or another, whatever the bill might propose to do—and we're not talking about raising taxes here, because you need royal recommendation to do that, all we're talking about is reducing revenue—you then have to find the money somewhere else, because there are no free lunches in this business.

Not only does this destabilize the fiscal framework, but it also destabilizes the whole budget development process. As you know, members on both sides of the House get quite a look-in on the business of developing a budget and make recommendations. If you go through the finance committee report, you'll find that the minister has picked up on quite a number of recommendations from members. These find their way into the budget, I would submit, in a fiscally responsible way.

This business of one-off—where you have \$30 million here and \$20 million there and \$100 million there—is very difficult when you're trying to keep track of what's going to be up and what's not going to be up and how it will ultimately impact, not only on the budget-making process, but also on the revenues that the government can expect.

I'll give you a small illustration of the difficulties the minister faces in trying to set priorities and integration. You'll recollect that in May of last year the finance committee heard witnesses on the jewellery tax issue. The jewellery tax issue is a relatively simple bill. The recommendations by the committee were that the minister phase the jewellery tax out by a staged reduction in the percentage rate supplied of excise tax, or phase it out by raising the thresholds, or do a combination of both. This report was asked for by the minister himself. He asked the committee for advice—you know, we want to do something about the excise tax, so hear the witnesses and give us your advice.

This happened in May, and then, of course, there was the election. Then in the fall the committee effectively adopted the same report over again and made the same recommendation to the minister. The minister then took that advice and integrated it into the budget. The decision was made to phase the jewellery tax out over a period of five years in a staged reduction of the percentage rate of 10, 8, 6, 4, 2, and 0. He did that in the context of knowing what revenues the jewellery tax generates and what revenues would be lost by doing it over that five-year period.

There is currently a private member's bill—which may fail for other reasons, but it illustrates the problem—that says the jewellery tax should be immediately eliminated. The swing in the difference in the minister's approach over five years, the minister's approach recommended by the committee over five years, and the immediate elimination of the tax is something in the order of \$150 million, which is a pretty significant sum of money.

Most members would say that's the minister's problem, because he's going to have to go somewhere else to find the revenue to replace that \$150 million. But in a minority government it becomes a problem for all of us, because \$150 million has to be replaced and it has to come out of some other priority. The members have spoken through their committee, saying that we should have a phase-out. Now they're saying no, it should be immediate elimination. It makes budget-making very difficult.

We are proposing a small change to the way in which private members' bills are handled so that we can have a fiscal impact analysis prior to going through the entire private member process. We're not proposing to change the process for private members, but we are proposing that where a private member's bill has an impact on the fiscal framework, there should first be an analysis done on what the impact will be on the fiscal framework, before this committee or some other committee.

It still wouldn't give any ability on the part of a subcommittee or anybody else to stall the bill, delay the bill, or kill the bill, but we'll at least have a consensus figure on what the impact is going to be. Members in a minority government will then realize that this will have a fiscal impact. They'll realize this will affect priorities. They will realize this will have to be integrated into the budget-making process.

That's my argument for members. As I say, we're currently looking at a variety of bills. Some have an impact of \$65 million, some are \$35 million, and some are \$5 million. After a while, you total all of these impacts, and it starts to be real money. Currently, the analysis from the minister is that the twenty bills constitute \$2 billion worth of reduced revenues. In and of itself, that is a fairly significant hit on the fiscal framework.

Anyway, I throw that out as an idea. I hope that members respond favourably, and maybe I can respond to questions.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Parliamentary Secretary.

We will go to some questions. Mr. Casey will start us off. If anybody else wants one, just signal to me.

Mr. Bill Casey (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): I have three questions.

First of all, it certainly sounds sensible to me, but how do you identify which bills would be covered under this? Who does the assessment? How will any outcome of the assessment have an impact?

Hon. John McKay: First of all, there's always an assessment done by the department on any bill that is put in as a private member's bill.

Mr. Bill Casey: Have they done it on every single bill?

Hon. John McKay: Yes, they do it routinely.

Then, of course, it starts to get serious when it hits the order of precedence. For instance, I have a list here: Bill C-214 has \$30 million in estimated costs; Bill C-271 is estimated to be \$40 million; Bill C-246 is \$10 million; Bill C-239 is \$100 million; Bill C-319 is \$30 million; and we have a big one here for Bill C-218 at \$1.3 billion. It's pretty serious money by anybody's standard.

Mr. Bill Casey: Again, how do you decide which one you would do? Do you look at every single bill?

Hon. John McKay: We look at every single bill, but I would think just before it hits the order of precedence is maybe the point where you would look at it. I don't think a committee should waste a lot of its time worrying about a bill that's never going to actually hit the floor or that will hit the floor in 18 months, or something of that nature. That would be my quick reaction to your question.

Mr. Bill Casey: So who does the assessment?

Hon. John McKay: The department does.

Mr. Bill Casey: I would say I think your proposal would have more luck if you had some kind of outside opinion on it.

Hon. John McKay: Well, the proponent of the bill is presumably able to bring someone from the outside to challenge the department's estimates. I don't see why, just because the department says it's going

to cost x , we immediately accept the department's version. In fact, were I a private member proposing a bill to reduce expenditures in some fashion or another and I knew that I had to face the department and the department was going to draw a straight line saying this is going to cost the fiscal framework \$30 million, I think my argument would be that you haven't calculated the economic multiplier that would be appropriate to the hopefully beneficial economic impact by reducing taxes by \$30 million.

• (1645)

Mr. Bill Casey: I just think if you had a bill that the government didn't want to pass, you could say it's going to cost \$1.3 billion, and that would certainly discourage an awful lot of support for the bill. A government could use that as a tool to discourage support for the bill. So I think you should come up with a plan whereby an outside independent panel rather than the government could determine the value. The Department of Finance obviously has a conflict of interest. I would suggest that you make part of this proposal that you'll fund, or whatever, an outside expert to do each one.

Hon. John McKay: I can't envision how that would be done, but I can't say that I can argue with you either.

Mr. Bill Casey: Do you see my point?

Hon. John McKay: Yes, I understand your point. At one level the department wants to say it's going to cost a lot of money and therefore you shouldn't do it. I understand that. On the other hand, members need to have a pretty good handle on what the impact of this measure is.

Mr. Bill Casey: I think it's a great idea. You just have to have numbers you can feel comfortable with.

Hon. John McKay: That's a good general point.

The Chair: Mr. Guimond, go ahead, please.

[Translation]

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

Mr. McKay, as parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Finance, is probably here on government service, but I want to say that the Subcommittee on Private Members' Business is the only place where members of Parliament can fully play their role, introduce a project, bring it to fruition and do some lobbying to their colleagues from other parties. Private members' bills are the only ones on which each member votes according to his or her conscience, where there are no party lines, even though parties can suggest a stand. It is the ultimate place where a private member can stand for an issue that is dear to his heart through a piece of legislation or a motion.

Ever since the government was put in a minority position, they are looking for excuses to interfere with private members' business and they are using arguments—very weak ones in my view—to compensate for the power that they had when they were in a majority position. The Subcommittee on Private Members' Business is not the only place where this is playing out, but I want to underline that, more and more often, when we introduce amendments to bills in committee we are told that these amendments would be out of order at the royal proclamation stage. The law clerks—I dare hope that our law clerks remain impartial—have the reflex, more and more often, of rejecting amendments coming from opposition parties.

Let me come back to the business at hand. Many bills involve financial obligations. For private members' business, all parties agreed on some criteria. Our colleague from the NDP gave his support even though at the beginning he was against. We agreed on the fact that these bills must deal with federal jurisdiction issues, that they must comply with the Constitution and that they must deal with a matter that is not presently on the House of Commons' agenda.

It seems that the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Finance almost wants us to add another criteria to make sure that there are no financial implications. Under the agreed criteria, we could not create any new taxes. We must not create a new tax, but it is clear that our proposals could have financial implications. We just obtained an independent employment insurance account. If we were to apply the parliamentary secretary's argument, there would be no independent account. However, we just voted on that and it was passed by a vote of 131 to 116.

I do not agree with adding a fourth criteria. We could no longer introduce any bill, except perhaps to officially declare that bananas are good for your health or to declare July 28 as the national bermuda day or slippers day! We should not ridicule the whole process.

• (1650)

The Chair: Have you finished?

[*English*]

Hon. John McKay: I did need translation for that.

Let me just respond to whatever it was Michel said.

I frankly think that if a minority government means anything and it's designed to work, then all members have to be responsible for the initiatives that they take. I have been on the other side of the table. One of my proudest moments as a parliamentarian was getting royal assent for a private member's bill. I know something about all of the grief that you have to go through in order to be able to get from introduction all the way through the Senate to royal assent. It's quite formidable.

If the argument is that you need to know that it's within federal jurisdiction, that seems sensible. If you need to know that it's constitutionally compliant, that seems sensible. So why is it not sensible to know, within some parameters, what it's going to cost the fiscal framework? It's not going to apply to all bills. It's only going to apply to bills that purport to reduce expenditures. To my mind, that's the responsible attitude to take to this.

Of course, the government will continue to oppose things. That's what you expect. The reality in this situation is that Parliament can propose reductions in expenditures that are fairly significant and that have the ability to essentially destabilize the fiscal framework. The illustration is that cumulatively it's \$2 billion.

The Chair: Okay.

Yvon.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Thank you.

You talked earlier about an assessment of the cost for each bill. Is that it? What about Bill C-280?

[*English*]

Hon. John McKay: That was the one we just did, wasn't it?

Mr. Yvon Godin: That was the one you voted against not too long ago.

Hon. John McKay: I'm not sure I have the number.

It illustrates the problem. I don't have it on my list of bills, so I don't know the number. We just voted on something and we don't know what the cost of it is. All members did.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Let's come back to the question that you were asking. I missed the first part. Do you simply want the cost of bills to be made public?

[*English*]

You want to figure out what it costs?

Hon. John McKay: No. What I would like this committee or another committee to do is this. When a bill gets on the order of precedence, then this committee or another committee would analyze the impact on the fiscal framework. Mr. Casey has suggested that the government may be slightly biased in this. I'm even prepared to concede that.

Having said that, members should know what this actually is going to cost the fiscal framework.

• (1655)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Okay, but then we know how much it costs. What do we do with it?

Hon. John McKay: Then it goes forward in a normal way. A committee can't kill the bill just because it's going to cost some money. We want some consensus as to what it's going to cost.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You said that we should be responsible when we are in a minority government. I hoped and I wished on the day I walked in here eight years ago that I was a responsible person, all the way through.

It's just that. We have a majority that is not the government in the House of Commons, and they make a decision. I have to agree with Michel when he says a private member's bill is very sacred to people.

Hon. John McKay: I don't disagree with that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Personally, I will say that \$46 billion have disappeared from the employment insurance fund, even though this money belongs to workers. We have to live with that. This money did not belong to the government because it had not been put in by the government.

[*English*]

Hon. John McKay: Let's not mix apples and oranges here.

Mr. Yvon Godin: It makes a good punch, though.

Hon. John McKay: Yes, it's a good punch, but it's an irrelevant argument.

The issue is that if this minority government is to work, all members, government and opposition, have to have some understanding of what impact this might have on the fiscal framework. They're going to have to decide in their own minds whether it's a priority.

You have your private member's bill. It's sacred to you. I agree with Michel. This is the most important thing you have going. This is extremely important either to your riding or to you personally or to a group you might represent. I understand that completely.

That being said, it is one priority among a multitude of priorities. If it's going to cost \$50 million, you're going to have to ask yourself, well, is this the best way we can spend \$50 million and so reduce government revenues? I don't know. But if you don't have the information and you don't have somebody sign off on what it's ultimately going to cost, you're essentially going to be stuck with the government arguing, oh, this is going to cost \$50 million.

Well, maybe it won't cost \$50 million; maybe it will only cost \$25 million, or maybe it will cost \$60 million.

A voice: Or maybe it will save money.

Hon. John McKay: Yes, or maybe it will.

It seems to me you have to go through that exercise, and it seems to me that's not an unreasonable request.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like to make a correction: it was not 136-116, but rather 156-116. Parliament has spoken.

[*English*]

I thought you'd be there, Rodger.

The Chair: We have a rotation. We'll go to Rodger now.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): I noticed when you read off your list that Bill C-273 wasn't on it, which is an outstanding piece of private member's legislation.

Hon. John McKay: It is an amazing piece of legislation. That's Rodger's bill. It's also fairly costly. We clock it in at \$65 million.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: I think it's significantly less than that, with the two tiers that are applied there now. Bill C-273 is for emergency volunteer firefighters.

Probably one of the most significant responsibilities the people of Canada entrust to elected officials is the responsibility to manage their tax dollars. I certainly would think an exercise in identifying the cost of private members' legislation makes a great deal of sense. At day's end, when we have some success with private members' legislation, there is a real cost to the treasury. There has to be some kind of tally when there's an operational deficit at year's end.

One piece of legislation there, you're saying, would cost approximately \$1.3 billion. That's a significant expenditure. To plan for that, to identify that, we have to be able to point back and say, well, the government did oppose this legislation.

When we're giving stuff away, it's really easy to stand and say these people deserve our support, but there is a cost. To govern is to decide; to govern is to choose, and what we're trying to look at

through your initiative here today is putting a price tag on those decisions.

If we could, let's maybe get some suggestions. I don't know what the best approach to this would be, but I certainly see the merit in pursuing an effort to be able to affix a cost to each bill that goes forward.

• (1700)

Hon. John McKay: Well, to try to marry your comments with Bill's comments, take your specific bill—

Mr. Bill Casey: Could you rephrase that?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. John McKay: After last night pretty well everything's on the table.

The government says your cost is \$65 million. You have no basis for arguing that point, and I'm not prepared to question the analysis of the government, particularly the Department of Finance. But it seems to me it would be an advantage to you to go before the finance committee, once you hit the order of precedence, and have that discussion on what the fiscal impact is. Then you would head back to the floor of the House.

You would lose no time; you would settle one of the arguments, which is the cost of the fiscal impact; and in some respects it would work against the government in a perverse sort of way. Once the number was settled, the number would be settled, and we couldn't scare people any longer into saying, "Oh, this is going to cost an outrageous sum of money". Maybe it won't. Maybe it won't be \$65 million; maybe it'll be \$35 million all around. I really don't know. But it seems to me it would have been advantageous for you, as a private member presenting a private bill that's going to cost the government money, to have taken that argument off the table one way or another.

The Chair: Bill.

Mr. Bill Casey: I just think this makes common sense. I really don't know why it didn't come up before. A very important part of every decision is knowing how much it's going to cost.

The only thing I find is that the finance department will have a conflict of interest. So how can we provide for another opinion? Can finance provide a committee with the resources to hire another auditor or an outside independent accountant to analyze the value of this? You're saying his bill will cost \$65 million. I voted for his bill. I didn't know it was going to cost \$65 million. I should have known that. You say it will cost less—\$35 million.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: I should know that.

Hon. John McKay: I'm using \$35 million as a number. I'm just throwing it out.

Mr. Bill Casey: Whatever it is—but here we are, we don't know. We're just throwing around, "Give or take \$30 million". It's just 100%, that's all, and we should know that.

I will support this. I just want to know that we will have an independent opinion, an assessment of what it will cost. I think it's the right thing to do, no question. I'd like to know.

Hon. John McKay: I think there is an answer to your question, Bill; I'm just not sure where I'd look. Certainly the department would know people who are able to criticize their numbers.

Mr. Bill Casey: If this committee, or whatever committee, had the resources, we could perhaps engage an outside authority to analyze it and just keep it completely away, because anything associated with the department is going to....

Hon. John McKay: My initial thought was if you're drawing on the order of precedence and there were a fiscal impact, you'd immediately go to the finance committee and there would be a settlement on the number. Without losing any order of precedence, you'd still stay on the floor of the House.

Mr. Bill Casey: Somebody has to have access to the expertise and the resources to analyze it, whether it's the finance committee or this committee. Wouldn't the finance committee drag it out a lot?

Anyway, that's all I have. I think it's a good idea. It only makes sense.

Hon. John McKay: The proposal doesn't propose losing time for a member. That's not right. It will move forward in the flow of things on the floor of the House in the same manner, but at least we'll have a bit of knowledge behind us.

• (1705)

The Chair: Most bills we vote on and then they go to committee. Is there any role for the committee to play with their researchers to do it? I think people have forgotten about the fiscal side of it. It comes in and we have witnesses, and so on. I'm just wondering what role our legislative committees could play in that process.

When the bill passes through the first time you might not know how much it will cost. But when it goes to committee, is there anything that can be done to have their research people get the numbers from finance? Finance can produce them, as they are now, send them to the committee, and the committee can then say, "Oh boy, this is really out of whack", or whatever?

I'm throwing that out. I don't know what your thoughts are, if you want to comment on that. Is there any role to be played by the legislative committees, rather than setting up another committee?

Hon. John McKay: When I think about it a bit, the finance committee is your obvious place to go as a legislative committee. They do have some expertise. Whether the researchers are able to do the analysis Bill and Rodger would like is another issue. But that seems to be a logical place for it to go.

The Chair: Michel.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I think the parliamentary secretary is rather nervy. In Quebec, we have a beautiful phrase for this: "A person who is headstrong all around the head". I don't know how our interpreters will translate that.

[English]

Hon. John McKay: That didn't come through.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: This would be more applicable to Mr. Godin. John has nice hair.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Look how headstrong Yvon Godin is, all around!

Mr. Michel Guimond: John has put a lot of emphasis on consultation. He said that members must be consulted. Let me make a comment, because it has been a long time since I have come to the subcommittee.

This subcommittee always worked in a consensual fashion. The proof of this is that when the government had a majority, they were not the majority on this committee; we were working in a consensual fashion with one representative per party. I will make a partisan comment and remind you of what Mr. McKay said on the consultation of members. I consider that it is a form of censorship, a takeover from the Department of Finance on private members' initiatives. For example, Mr. Cuzner has decided in good faith to introduce a \$65 million bill for firefighters. Because Mr. Goodale, the Minister of Finance, has decided that it was not part of his priorities and because you have not put this in your budget, the member would be denounced as irresponsible, a bad manager. They would say that that it makes no sense investing \$65 million for firefighters. It would discourage this type of initiative.

Anything that does not come under the fiscal framework unilaterally decided upon by the Department of Finance would have no sense. Wait a minute! When I came of age and reached the age of majority at 18, I stopped nursing my mother and became independent from my parents. I do not want to be forced to nurse the Minister of Finance forever. Let me make another partisan comment—

[English]

Hon. John McKay: The translators are laughing. I've never met anybody who breast-fed until they were 18.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: We came to an agreement on the Speech from the Throne because the prime minister realized that he was in a minority position. He consulted opposition parties and we ended up with a Speech from the Throne that was passed unanimously with amendments, after consultation. However, for the budget speech, we asked the government and thereafter the Minister of Finance whether they would seek suggestions from opposition parties. They said no, that the decision was theirs since it was their budget. This means that we would have to ask permission from you to introduce anything that is not already part of your budget. You would then have the privilege of saying that no, that \$65 million for firefighters does not make any sense, that Mr. Goodale has not given it any thought and that it would create problems.

When he granted \$13 billion to the armed forces, did he consult us? You gave that amount to the army and the conservatives were happy. You have decided to spend \$13 billion for the army, but not to give \$65 million to firefighters. Live with your decisions and do what must be done to balance the budgets. There is no way I could subscribe to this. I have reached the age of majority.

• (1710)

[English]

Hon. John McKay: Oh, thank goodness. And he stopped breast-feeding.

Your essential point is that this is a form of control, which I think is nonsense. When you have a justice bill before you, it has to go through an analysis as to whether it complies with the Constitution. I don't think the Minister of Justice controls private members' bills.

Mr. Michel Guimond: It's not only this, John. Every bill must respect the Constitution.

Hon. John McKay: Exactly, but is that a form of control? Because it's the Minister of Justice who signs off on whether this is or is not compliant with the Constitution and the charter.

I don't see what the big issue is here. All we are suggesting, effectively, is that the finance committee reach some consensus as to what the actual fiscal impact of this bill is going to be. In all other respects, if people think this is a priority, it's a priority. Whether the minister incorporates it into the budget is his decision. Nothing else changes.

I appreciated the discourse, but I didn't think it was terribly relevant to what is in front of us, which is simply an analysis so that Rodger's not stuck saying this is only going to cost \$30 million, and the minister is saying no, it costs \$65 million, but effectively members will know in front of the House, while they're deciding whether this is within their priorities, whether this is an important thing to do, and that this is a number and there is a consensus around that number.

To me, it actually strengthens private members' bills, because effectively you take one of the minister's main arguments away from him, which is that this is going to cost too much. So he's lost that argument.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Casey had another question.

Mr. Bill Casey: Do you do analysis on every one of your bills? All government bills are analyzed, I'm sure. Is that public?

Hon. John McKay: Can you give me an illustration? The budget is obviously a major—

Mr. Bill Casey: That's what I'm thinking, that the budget is public. But is every bill that you bring forward analyzed and made public? If we're going to do this we should do it both ways.

Hon. John McKay: I believe that it is fully costed.

Do you remember our friend Alex Shepherd, years ago? That was one of his big things, and I believe there was a change in procedure that required that the government fully cost its initiatives.

Mr. Bill Casey: What about a third-party assessment of those assessments? Again, if the government wants this to go through they can put a low number on it. If we're going to do this for private

members' bills, we should do it for government bills as well and have an independent assessment. I think it's really a good idea for everything—

Hon. John McKay: I haven't thought about that a lot, and there may be an answer to your question. My recollection was that in the last Parliament we did that thing and I thought that it was assigned to John Williams' committee. I thought, but I'm not absolutely certain.

There was another committee that was created that Mr. Valeri and Mr. Alcock were chairing, or co-chairing, or were chair and vice-chair, and I thought that's where they had the actual arguments about the cost. I may be off on a line of speculation. I'll try to get an answer for you.

• (1715)

Mr. Bill Casey: What's the next step in this process?

Hon. John McKay: I have to have some direction from you, and then if in fact you want me to pursue your line I would initially ask the department who they think could provide critical analysis of their analysis. I just don't know how you'd go about that, to be honest with you.

Mr. Bill Casey: You explore it, and I'll explore it as well, and we'll meet again maybe, or whatever you want to do. But in principle I agree with it.

Hon. John McKay: I'm sure in principle Michel and Yvon agree as well.

Mr. Yvon Godin: In principle, I just want to say I have a hard time with that because of the \$4.6 billion break you've given to the big corporations. It seems to me they knew how to do it, and here's a little bill of \$65 million. To me, it's very small for the firefighters.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: I agree with Michel's comments. The group is usually fairly cohesive. I know you didn't wish to create any cleavage with your comments, but whenever the government enters into a project, a program, or a government initiative, obviously one of the things we try to dial in as close as we can is the numbers. Sometimes we're a little bit more successful than at others. A case in point is the gun registry.

With a government bill coming forward, we put forward numbers. And of course with Kyoto the numbers were on either side of the spectrum. But I think on this we'd be doing a great disservice if we didn't make the attempt to pursue this initiative, to try to get to each elected member some understanding about the cost of his supporting a particular piece of private members' legislation. I think we'd be doing a great disservice if we didn't pursue this and try to hang a number off it.

Mr. Yvon Godin: But we don't want the same thing to happen. You touched on this, and maybe you shouldn't have talked about it, but the gun registry cost \$2 billion when it was supposed to cost \$2 million. I can assure you the people working in Miramichi, neighbours of my riding, never got \$2 billion. Where did it go?

If they make those types of estimates on private members' bills, and they make this type of error, a private member's bill could be lost just because of an estimate like that. That's a big difference: \$2 million to \$2 billion. We're not talking about \$2 million to \$3 million.

Hon. John McKay: To go to the essential point, there's the front end and the back end. The front end is where we're fishing around.

Mr. Yvon Godin: That's where you want to introduce it.

Hon. John McKay: When Minister Rock introduced the gun registry system, his analysis was that it was going to cost net \$2 million only. I think that was the number, wasn't it? It was something ridiculously low, as it turns out. The result has been ridiculously high, but the initial estimate of the cost was, as it turns out, ridiculously low.

So the point is that you want to avoid those mistakes as much as possible. And I can't imagine why, in private members' bills in particular, you wouldn't want to avoid those kinds of mistakes.

The Chair: Bill, one last comment.

Mr. Bill Casey: This is an interesting discussion. I'm glad you brought it up. If there had been a third-party independent assessment of the gun registry, maybe it wouldn't have passed. Maybe we would have had an idea of what it was going to cost.

So it's a really good idea. I think it's a good idea to look at this for all bills, not just private members' bills.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes, but it's the private ones that want to get the contract.

Mr. Bill Casey: Yes, exactly. But I agree with the concept. It's hard to believe that if any one of us were going to buy a car, and there were a Toyota Echo and a Mercedes sitting there—

● (1720)

Mr. Michel Guimond: A used car, or...?

Mr. Bill Casey: Or a used car—and I know about those things. We'd pick the Mercedes if we didn't know what the cost was. But if we knew the cost we might pick the Echo.

I'm just saying that if it was our own money, we'd want to know what it was going to cost.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Unless you were dealing with an honest salesman, where you'd just hand him over a blank cheque and say, "Fill in whatever number you want".

Mr. Bill Casey: Because car salesmen, according to the current survey, are more trustworthy than politicians.

The Chair: We'll wrap it up.

I want to thank the parliamentary secretary. It's giving us some food for thought. What I'm going to suggest, then, is that we're going to go in camera now. But I want to thank the parliamentary secretary for giving us some information that we will no doubt debate and look at when we're doing our report.

Thank you very much, Mr. McKay.

We'll go in camera now.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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