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—
Chair

The Honourable Diane Marleau

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• (0900)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Diane Marleau (Sudbury, Lib.)): Seeing a quorum, I'm calling the meeting to order.

Mr. Alghabra.

Mr. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga—Erindale, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have a motion for the committee. Learning from history, I was just wondering if the committee would mind looking over it now before we start our day's business.

The Chair: I'm here to serve the committee.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): I want to tell Mr. Alghabra that I understand his concern. However, I would do the opposite. Since we don't want to waste the time of our witnesses, I suggest we could stop everything at 10:45 a.m. Then, you would have time to thank the witnesses and we would have 15 minutes to dispose of the motion. That would be a nice compromise.

The Chair: That's a good idea. Everybody agrees?

[English]

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Why don't we just defeat the motion right now?

An hon. member: I guess we could.

The Chair: I am here to serve the committee. If it's the committee's wish that we wait until the end to debate it, then we will.

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): If this will be short, then we'll do it now.

An hon. member: I'll move the motion. I'll move Omar's motion.

The Chair: He can't. He has to move it.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Chris said we should wait. Madame Thibault said we should wait.

Mr. Mike Wallace: That's better than mine.

The Chair: Anyway, I'll make the decision. We'll go with the witnesses.

We have with us today members from the Canadian Union of Postal Workers.

Normally what we do is we give you 10 minutes, if you wish, to introduce yourselves and make a presentation. Then we go to the members for questions.

Please proceed.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque (National President, Canadian Union of Postal Workers): Thank you very much.

My name is Deborah Bourque. I'm the national president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. With me is Geoff Bickerton, our director of research.

On behalf of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, I want to thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before this committee.

CUPW represents 54,000 workers in large and small communities from coast to coast to coast. The vast majority of our members work for Canada Post. I think it's fair to say that this union knows better than most what it takes to make Canada Post work. CUPW has a well-developed, real-world understanding of this public institution. We know its history, its strengths, and its weaknesses.

I'll start with its strengths and then talk about some of the weaknesses we see in the system and some of the concerns we have for the future based on our experience and our history.

We truly believe that Canada Post's strengths lie in its mandate. The corporation is mandated by law to provide basic customary postal service while improving service, operating on a financially self-sustaining basis, and balancing its objectives with the needs of its employees, most of them CUPW members.

The act outlining this mandate, the Canada Post Corporation Act, was unanimously adopted by Parliament in 1981. This legislation was the product of more than two years of extensive consultation among parliamentarians, business groups, and postal unions. It was an agreement that was very carefully crafted to balance diverse needs, and it is an agreement that we believe still works for the public, our communities, and businesses both large and small.

There is no groundswell of opposition to the current mandate. Nevertheless, we've seen signs that Canada Post has unilaterally decided or has been instructed by the government—we don't know—to ignore its legislative mandate to provide public postal service, to break even, and to improve labour relations.

Before proceeding, I'd like to say that I don't intend to single out Ms. Greene in my remarks to come as being solely responsible for ignoring Canada Post's legal mandate. She is, however, the public face of the corporation and the corporation's spokesperson. I think it goes without saying that the government is primarily responsible for ensuring that Canada Post lives up to its legislative mandate to provide public postal service, to break even, and to improve labour relations.

To be frank, labour relations seem to have taken a back seat at Canada Post after a long period of decent labour management relations, at least at the national level. We've had almost a decade of labour peace. We've worked hard at developing solutions to problems through negotiations and pilot projects. But lately the corporation seems to be much more confrontational and a lot less interested in working with the union to develop solutions to problems at our public post office.

Canada Post President Moya Greene has called CUPW a special interest group. The corporation has publicly accused us of featherbedding and fear mongering—all this because we've raised concerns about post office and plant closures. We've not heard this kind of language from Canada Post since the mid eighties, when former President Don Lander tried to savagely cut jobs and service at Canada Post, including thousands of post offices.

The corporation is not interested in operating the post office on a financially self-sustaining basis either. Ms. Greene doesn't think the corporation makes enough money, even though it has had 11 consecutive years of profit. It made \$199 million this year alone. The president of Canada Post actually told one parliamentary committee that she thinks the corporation is "withering". Last year we delivered record volumes of mail to a record number of householders and made \$199 million in profit. We don't think that's an indication of a corporation that's withering.

Last but not least, Ms. Greene seems to think public postal service is a thing of the past and not something that she has to pay attention to. She's fond of saying that Canada Post is a commercial enterprise and that she has a business mandate. But Canada Post is not a commercial enterprise; it's a crown corporation.

Crown corporations like Canada Post have both public and commercial activities, but they are distinct from commercial enterprises in that they are designed to serve the public interest, not simply maximize profit.

● (0905)

Crown corporations like Canada Post do not have business mandates, but this is exactly what Moya Greene says she has, and it is this steadfast adherence to a business mandate that threatens to undermine our public postal system.

For example, Moya Greene has justified closing the Quebec City mail processing plant on the grounds that it's a good business decision, and she says workers will not be harmed and service will not suffer. No one really believes this. The people of Quebec City don't believe it. Businesses in Quebec, municipalities from coast to coast, and many members of Parliament have expressed their concerns about this closure and others, but Ms. Greene does not see why she should have to take these views into consideration.

I would argue that the government—or shareholder, if you prefer—needs to develop a democratic and uniform process for making these kinds of decisions in consultation with the public, postal workers, and major stakeholders. We understand that the government is only responsible for providing broad policy direction to crown corporations and that it is not to become involved in day-to-day operations, but we think the responsibility to provide broad policy direction obliges the government to deal with fundamental issues such as the integrity of our public postal network.

This network is at risk. In July 2005, Canada Post announced it would be reviewing the national postal network, including all mechanized processing plants, and that the Quebec City mail processing plant would be the first facility to be reviewed. The corporation announced its plans to close the plant three weeks later.

Canada Post has refused to release information relating to this review. It claims that it does not have a plan and that it simply looks at facilities on a case-by-case basis. No matter what the corporation does, we need a better process for making changes to the network—a process that involves the public, the people who built and paid for our public post office.

We need a better process for the moratorium on closures as well. First, let me say I was happy to hear Minister Lawrence Cannon say, at the transport committee last week, that his government is taking a status quo approach to the moratorium. This is good news, although we'd like the minister to extend the moratorium to include urban closures as well, and to work with us and others on a better process for making changes to the network.

The current process is not working. Canada Post is closing rural post offices in spite of the moratorium and in spite of opposition to the closures. Publicly, the corporation says it consults with local officials to see what can be done to avoid a closure—not postal workers, not the public, not municipalities, just local officials. This leaves way too many people out of the discussion.

Public institutions need public input. CUPW believes that this fundamental flaw needs to be fixed. We hope it will be fixed, perhaps as part of the review the government is conducting in connection with the financial and policy framework it uses for Canada Post.

To date, this policy framework review has been conducted in secret. The previous federal government started the review. It's our understanding that there is a report, and that the Conservative government will decide whether or not to alter the current financial and policy framework.

This framework provides the basis for raising the price of a standard stamp. It sets targets for service standards, return on equity, and dividend policy, and it includes the moratorium on closures. Changes to the policy framework could undermine universal public postal service as we know it—or it could improve it. We know from highly censored documents we recently received through access to information that Canada Post and the government are discussing what is and what is not considered to be part of the post office's universal service obligation, and that the government may conduct a mandate review.

This sets off some alarm bells for us. The last mandate review questioned the very nature of our universal public postal system, as well as the post office's right to engage in commercial activities. For example, it asked if services should be modified, added to, or relinquished; if the corporation should generate a commercial return on equity; if it should aim to operate on a break-even basis; and if the exclusive privilege of the corporation should be adjusted or discontinued.

We're especially concerned because the last mandate review was announced just a few months after a coalition of Canada Post competitors called for a review to look at whether the post office should be allowed to compete with the private sector. We have a similar situation brewing at the moment.

● (0910)

Earlier this year, the Canadian International Mail Association called for a parliamentary review of the exclusive privilege, and just last month, John McKay, Liberal member of Parliament for Scarborough—Guildwood, attacked the exclusive privilege in the House of Commons on behalf of re-mailers, who are unhappy that the exclusive privilege includes international mail. Minister Lawrence Cannon has promised to look into this issue and advise the House as to what the government intends to do in the coming days.

We're concerned that Minister Cannon is investigating this issue and conducting a policy framework review without our input, and he may even be looking at conducting a mandate review without our input. We want more information on what's going on and we want input. There needs to be much more transparency and accountability at Canada Post, and we think it needs to come from both the corporation and from the government.

Thanks for listening. We'd be happy to answer any of your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That was right on.

We'll go with the first questioner, for seven minutes. It is Mr. Alhabra.

Mr. Omar Alhabra: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning to both of you. Thank you for coming here.

Obviously our intention as a committee is to hear from the union, which we feel is a big part of Canada Post, and hear from management later on. We hope that we don't become a tool of negotiation between management and union, but we want to understand what's going on and hopefully be able to participate in improving the services and the future of Canada Post.

I'd like to step back and hear your point of view on how you see Canada Post as an enterprise. What are the key success factors for it? What are the competitive forces, and what do you think needs to be done to ensure continuing success of the enterprise?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I would say, first of all, that we don't think Canada Post is broken. We don't think it needs to be fixed.

We know that Canada Post is a public sector success story. Canada Post has an international reputation in terms of providing quality universal public postal service. Canada Post has one of the lowest postage rates in the G-7 and, I would argue, is one of the best postal services in the world. Having said that, I think lots can be done to improve it, and that success story is definitely at risk right now.

The competitive situation with Canada Post is very difficult right now. As you may know, many of Canada Post's competitors are increasingly aggressive and increasingly predatory—folks like United Parcel Service, who have challenged the Canadian government under the North American Free Trade Agreement, suggesting that Canada Post's public network of post offices and mailboxes is somehow unfair competition. We think there are lots of challenges in terms of Canada Post's ability to compete.

We also think it's very important that Canada Post continue to be able to compete with the private sector, because the revenues Canada Post earns from competitive services are used to finance the universal service obligation Canada Post has to provide basic customary service to all communities, regardless of size, at a universal price.

● (0915)

Mr. Omar Alhabra: Okay, but in an ideal world, in a perfect world, what kinds of services and what quality of services do you envision Canada Post doing? I would like to hear your vision of Canada Post.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Our vision of Canada Post for the future is a post office that, first and foremost, remains public and acts in the public interest. We believe that Canada Post definitely has to respond to the changes in the communications field, changes in technology. There are lots of alternatives to basic letter mail these days, and we think Canada Post has to meet those challenges.

We think the wrong way to meet those challenges is by downsizing and focusing solely on the financial bottom line. We think Canada Post has to be vibrant; it has to grow, it has to expand services, and it has to continue to meet the needs of the communities it services in this vast country.

In order to continue to meet the needs of those communities, there has to be a public debate about the future of public postal service. We would argue that Canada Post has to consult with the communities and find a democratic way of making changes. We're not suggesting Canada Post should never change, or the way service is provided should never change, or the network of post offices should never change. We just think change has to be for a good reason, not just to make profits by dumping real estate or to improve the financial bottom line by cutting back service. We think any changes to service have to be designed to improve and expand service.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Do I have more time?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Obviously, in any type of corporation I think the dynamic between union and management is a healthy dynamic; I think the outcome usually benefits everybody. I understand the natural dynamic, but what do you think are the root causes of some of the fundamental grievances, in your opinion? What are they? Could you just summarize them for us from your perspective?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: From our perspective, we're very worried about labour relations right now at Canada Post. We're very worried about the relationship the union has with Canada Post at the national level, because we've worked really hard to improve labour relations, and I think we were a definite part of the solution and a definite contribution to the fact that there have been 10 years of labour peace.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Can you just tell me exactly what you mean? What concerns you about the relationship that's going on right now?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: We're concerned that the new president of Canada Post doesn't understand the union, doesn't trust the union, and doesn't believe she needs to consult with the union or have input from it. She referred to us as a special interest group at a meeting we had recently. We're more than a special interest group; we represent the vast majority of employees that make Canada Post the success story it is. We believe we're a major stakeholder.

We have concerns about the lack of understanding of and lack of trust in the union. We've shown, through negotiations and joint pilot projects, that we're able to resolve problems. We're seeing Canada Post management at the national level step back from some of that joint work, or from some of those projects that we have been successful on over the last 10 years. We're seeing them step back, and there's a lot more resistance to doing that kind of work together.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: I think you can help us more if you can be more specific about what exactly you think the problems are in the direction that management has taken. You're still remaining at an abstract level. See if you can help us, by maybe pointing out one or two major or fundamental issues.

• (0920)

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I can give you two examples. One is what's called Appendix T, a provision in our collective agreement for a joint committee with funding, and with equal responsibility, allowing us to test new initiatives—job creation initiatives and service expansion initiatives. It allows the corporation to contract out work without taking a whole bunch of risk with their normal operating budget. There is a special fund set aside for these projects. The projects have been extremely successful, but we've been unable to get any projects through that committee for the last two years. We used to be very successful in retail services, expanding retail services, expanding parcel services, and in dealing with new technology, creating jobs for our members and improving service for communities. It didn't cost Canada Post a lot of money. We thought it was a win-win situation, but we're not going anywhere with those any more.

The most recent example is rural delivery. A number of our members in rural communities have invoked their right to refuse under the Canada Labour Code. Legitimate health and safety concerns also have a real impact on service in those communities. Canada Post's response was not to sit down and work with the union and come up with viable options to resolve this issue, but their first reaction was to remove service from those communities, put in community mailboxes without any notice and without any consultation with the communities, and then just live with the resulting backlash that came, justifiably, from those communities.

We're trying right now to find a way to work out those issues with Canada Post, because we're very concerned about our members' health and safety. We're also extremely concerned that this is the first step in the abandonment of rural mail delivery, or at least a demonstration of a lack of commitment to rural service.

We could work this out. We have lots of good ideas, and there are lots of forums for us to work this out together, but we're not seeing any willingness from Canada Post to actually sit down and work this out with the union.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Madame Thibault.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here this morning, Mrs. Bourque and Mr. Bickerton, thank you for being here this morning. I have three series of questions to ask. I may not be able to ask them all during this round and I might have to come back. They relate to rural service, the IBM study, and the issue of equal treatment.

First of all, I want to raise an issue that is dear to the people I represent since I represent a mainly rural riding. I hope that the good residents of Rimouski will not be offended.

My question relates to the service in rural areas and the way staff is configured. I would like to know if only the people working in post offices are unionized or if people walking the routes are also unionized, as well as the people having contracts to deliver mail on rural routes. Could you give me a brief explanation about that?

[*English*]

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes, we have 6,600 members across Canada and Quebec who deliver to rural mailboxes and community mailboxes in the area. Prior to January 2004, those 6,600 workers were independent contractors. Their routes came up for tender every five years and they had to bid on their routes.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: They're your union members, if I may say so.

[English]

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes.

• (0925)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: I read in the papers, and I would like you to confirm or deny that, that some people delivering the mail in rural areas are concerned about their safety because some roads are badly maintained. Our winters are tough and one runs the risk of ending up in the ditch if one gets too close to some mailboxes. Is it true that some people are on the verge of refusing to deliver the mail for safety reasons?

[English]

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Roughly 279 workers have invoked the right to refuse under the Canada Labour Code. All but a couple of those complaints were found to be valid by Labour Canada.

There are two types of risk that have been identified. One is regarding the ergonomic effect of reaching across your vehicle to put mail out the passenger-side door into the mailbox. Canada Post policy is that even if it's safe to do so, workers aren't permitted to exit the vehicle to put the mail in the box.

If you're lucky enough to have a bench seat in your car, you can reach across—there are still problems with the reach—but if you have a console, it's incredibly difficult to do that. That is the nature of the smaller number of the complaints.

The majority of complaints are about the particular highway conditions: very narrow shoulders, very high speed on the highway, very high traffic areas, visibility problems, curves, or hills. If a rural letter carrier has 900 households on his or her route and complains about three of them and says that three of those households are unsafe, we believe we have to look at those three delivery points and make those safe. Canada Post's reaction has been to pull delivery from all the houses on that route and make all those people go to community mailboxes. We think that's the wrong way to do it.

We need to look at each problem area and figure out what the options are. In some cases it may be simply a matter of moving the mailbox back a few feet. If there's a way to turn around, the worker could drive into the driveway. We certainly don't want them backing into those unsafe highways. We could reduce the speed on that area of the highway. We think there are lots of ways of resolving these problems.

But, instead, we're hearing now about people in these communities—seniors, people with disabilities, people with small children—who are forced to travel as far as 20 to 30 kilometres, in Fredericton, for instance, to get their mail from community mailboxes. They're quite justifiably outraged. Unfortunately, many of them are outraged at our members for having the audacity to complain about their health and safety when they should be angry at Canada Post for taking the easy way out and yanking service from those communities.

We also believe that if community mailboxes are the only way to make delivery safe on a particular portion of the route, then that should be a last resort, but they should be more accessible for people. It's unthinkable that people should have to go 20 kilometres to pick up their mail.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Do you think this is only a first step? In the communities I represent, this could lead to the closure of the post office because there would be no reason to keep it open. That's already happened in one case. In small communities, it may happen that the person managing the post office has to leave town or passes away. At that time, Canada Post tries to find a small business like a corner store or a gas station to provide the service.

One of my concerns is that once that step is taken, who knows where that kind of reorganization might lead, even though we're being told that there's no plan yet. I will come back later to the issue of the Québec City sorting plant.

Last June 1st, during a meeting of the Standing committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, the CEO stated that they don't have any reorganization plan for the whole of Canada but, when I see some of the decisions being made with the union, I am concerned. It's only a feeling I have. Do you have more than that? Do you have any evidence? I know my riding. In some ridings, that first step was taken and it led to closures or to a drastic reduction of services. Are your members aware of that or am I the only one to have this feeling?

• (0930)

[English]

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: We share your concerns. We have serious concerns that the closure of the Quebec City letter sorting facility is the first step in downsizing.

There are 22 mechanized postal facilities across the country. In many provinces, there is more than one postal facility, and in some provinces those two postal facilities are within driving distance of each other, the way Quebec City and Montreal are.

We're concerned that this is the first step. Canada Post announces a review. They say now they had no plans, but then why did they give the union notice under our collective agreement that they were going to be explicitly reviewing their network of postal facilities? They gave us that notice—we didn't dream that up—that they were starting with Quebec City. Three weeks later, they announced they were closing the Quebec City facility. We couldn't believe they would conduct a serious review and make that decision in three weeks. In fact, an arbitrator informed us that the decision had actually been made back in February, in violation of our collective agreement, and they hadn't informed the union.

It raised some alarm bells for us that this was the intention in terms of the rest of the network, that they were going to look at those opportunities where they believed they could downsize their network of post office facilities. So we're very concerned that Quebec City is just the tip of the iceberg.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you very kindly for coming in here today.

I want to touch on a couple of concerns. One, of course, is the rural closings, or potential closings and/or service to rural areas. Like many members, we represent rural concerns.

Another area I want to touch on, of course, is the repetitive stress injury situation. I can comment on this from some personal involvement, as I have many, many friends, associates, and relatives who work with Canada Post and have reported to me their personal or anecdotal comparisons as to what has taken place.

Might I just ask a couple of questions, then? Do you have any information about other jurisdictions, public and/or private, and/or competing influences, that have reported repetitive stress syndrome?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: In terms of delivery?

Mr. Daryl Kramp: In other words, is Canada Post the only one that has had this kind of repetitive stress report, complaint, or concern? Have other competing organizations, whether they're private sources or other public systems around the world, had other occurrences like this that you're aware of?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: The best example for us to look at is rural delivery in the United States. In the United States, they use right-hand-drive vehicles to deliver the mail. Of course, that's another option that exists, as these vehicles are in use in the United States, and mail service couriers and mobile letter carriers in Canada actually use right-hand-drive vehicles.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Okay, there's another question I would have then. Thank you for that information.

This is not a pro union/con union situation—far from it, because I do have total respect for the validity and the purpose and for the sensible.... Prior to the unionization in 2003 for I have no idea how many years—

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: A century.

Mr. Daryl Kramp:—literally, we've had this form of delivery, and yet I've never heard a complaint similar in nature to this from anybody I've ever talked to, nor have I heard of one being reported.

All of a sudden there is unionization, which means when we have a complaint we have a problem. The optics of this do not put the union in a good light. That's a reality. Could you just give me a response to that?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I've worked with rural and suburban mail couriers since about 1998, I think. We've been organizing those workers since that time, and we were successful in getting voluntary recognition for them in 2004. So I know these complaints have always existed. These routes that are unsafe today have always been unsafe. The difference is that prior to 2004, those workers had absolutely no rights under any collective agreement or in fact under the Canada Labour Code. So they did not have the right to file a complaint with Labour Canada. If they did raise these issues with management at Canada Post, they were routinely told, "If you don't like it, go work somewhere else". That's why these workers joined a union, because they wanted some protection.

So right now you're seeing workers who legitimately see their health and safety at risk and who now have some rights, the same rights every other worker in this country has, to file a complaint with Labour Canada regarding their health and safety.

• (0935)

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I can appreciate that. I'm just trying to deal with what appears to me to be a reality. I have talked to many members of the union, and they have told me first-hand, "This is horse feathers, it is bogus, it is ridiculous". They said, "We have delivered mail for x number of years. We can do our job; we can reach it; my heavens!" You can always find an excuse and/or try to find a way to not do your job.

Perhaps I'm living in a cocoon on this issue, because certainly if there's a legitimate concern, as an entrepreneur and/or a government official, I want to deal with that, but the impression I'm getting is that this is just an excuse to not do the job for a variety of reasons. The inference that this is not a legitimate concern is strongly felt out there in my community and in other communities that I've been in.

Road safety I can certainly understand. I really can. We drive in many areas in rural Canada where the shoulders are not maintained to the extent that they could be. But, for example, in most of these cases, they'll make arrangements with the local people. All of our delivery drivers do a bit of their own personal housekeeping, and they find a way to get it through. I see a little too much of the "big brother" approach on this, and we seem to be losing a bit of common sense in application here. I just have a concern that the union is overstepping its bounds. Could you correct me on that?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes. Let's be clear here. As I said, we represent 6,600 rural and suburban mail carriers. There have been fewer than 300 complaints with Labour Canada. Of course, not all of this work is unsafe. This work can be done safely. People want to do their jobs. I would say that even though these workers have the protection of the Canada Labour Code, they run a risk when they file a complaint regarding their health and safety.

We had a member out in Manitoba who filed a complaint with Labour Canada. Canada Post removed delivery from the households on his route and put in community mailboxes. He lost \$12,000 annual wages because he had lost the driving component of his route. The person working next to him on another route, who didn't even file a complaint with Labour Canada, had his route restructured. Community mailboxes were put in and he lost \$8,000 off his annual salary. These aren't highly paid workers. They run a real risk when they file these complaints.

The bigger risk for the 279 of them who have filed these complaints is that they're killed while doing their job.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: How many accidents of any serious nature have been reported—a PI, personal injury accident—over this late time period? Do you have any—

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Two weeks ago, two members in southern Ontario were in a traffic accident while delivering mail on their routes.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: What was the nature of the accident? Were they doing their duty and the accident was as a result of unsafe conditions?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: At some particular point, could you present the information or the accident report on that?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I don't have the information with me.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: No, no, I realize you wouldn't have it here. But could you access that and report it to this committee so we might be able to have a reasonable assessment as to just cause and reason for the said accident?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes, we can do that.

I was just told that there were 150 successful WSIB, Worker's Compensation, claims last year alone.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: From rural delivery only?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Rural delivery only.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Fine, thank you.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Oh, yes. We don't even want to get started on the inside.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I realize that.

• (0940)

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: That has the second highest injury levels in the federal sector.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Okay.

I have another question. Going back to the potential closure of rural post offices, do you have a list of the actual rural post offices that have been closed? I would appreciate you tabling that with this committee as well at some particular point. If you have it with you now, that would be good, and if you don't, I'd appreciate a notification of that.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Do you feel that you are under any pressure and/or competition from the private sources for your delivery, particularly in the rural areas for the after hours?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Rural mail delivery hasn't really hit our radar as being under threat by private sector competitors because there is not a whole lot of money to be made in delivering to rural communities. That's why we're so concerned about Canada Post's exclusive privilege. We believe that private sector competition is only interested in the lucrative urban markets. If Canada Post is not allowed to continue to maintain its exclusive privilege, competitors won't be interested in delivering in rural communities.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: I might just deliver a caution there. Once again, this is just a personal statement. I have been approached by many, many sources who say, "I wouldn't mind having that contract; I'd love to do that. If they don't want to put their arms out there because it's going to hurt their shoulder, I'll gladly take it on".

I realize that's a shallow statement coming from many people who sometimes either overreact or don't have information. But I would suggest to you that if the market isn't being filled and there is a void, the competitive nature of society generally does somehow find a way to facilitate that. There are many people who would like an opportunity to work for an income—period. Is that a situation we could or should consider?

In your negotiations, I certainly would caution that you not simply live in this world where no one else would be willing to do that job in rural Canada. I have 14% unemployment in a portion of my riding. I can assure you that there are a number of people who would willingly step forward to do a number of jobs, in a number of ways. I just ask you to consider that.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: That's correct. That's primarily the reason Canada Post was in fact able to exploit these workers for so many years, because that was their response: "If you don't like it, I have plenty of people in this rural community who are willing to take your job".

That varies based on the region of the country you live in. In Alberta these days, Canada Post can't get people to work at all, because there are better paying jobs in the oil industry, for example. But you're absolutely right, in many communities where you have high unemployment rates, people will work for a lot less than what they'll work for in urban centres.

The Chair: We'll now go to Madam Nash.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Bourque, and to you, Mr. Bickerton, for coming to our committee today and making your presentations.

I come from an urban riding in downtown Toronto. I have seen a lot of changes in postal services over the years. For example, I can go to my corner store now and there is a postal outlet. You can mail or pick up parcels, registered mail, etc. I don't necessarily have to go to the post office per se, which I used to have to do.

I wonder if you could describe a little more what you were referring to in your remarks when you said that over the last 10 years there has been a lot of exploration, I guess, of different ways of expanding the market for Canada Post services and exploring new ways of doing Canada Post business. Can you describe some of the initiatives that have been undertaken and where there have been successes or failures or changes over the last several years?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: In terms of the retail sector that you mentioned, over the past couple of decades, I guess, there's been more and more outsourcing of retail service to private franchises and drugstores and video stores, and things like that, at the expense of the corporate outlets. What we were able to do through this Appendix T, this joint committee that I've talked about, is to carry out experiments in terms of expanding hours at corporate outlets and expanding services at corporate outlets. That's been the criticism of the corporate outlets, that they're only open from, say, 9 o'clock until 5 o'clock, and that people who work during the day aren't able to get their parcels in the evening, like they can at the local mall or the drugstore, when there's a private sector outlet. So through Appendix T, we've been able to put in place initiatives where you can get expanded hours in the evenings and on the weekends in corporate retail outlets.

As for the types of services that are provided, we've recently started providing passport photos and applications at post offices, applications for student loans, more and more packaging material and places to actually wrap your parcels before you send them, and things like that. Through Appendix T, we've been able to make a number of the corporate outlets more responsive to the customer's needs and better able to compete with the private post offices.

We had one experiment where, for example, we put a corporate post office in a Loblaws store in Toronto, and that was tremendously successful. It was open the same hours as the Loblaws store and it was at the very front of the store. It was tremendously successful, with a lot of revenues for Canada Post. And we operationalized that experiment. That's the beauty of Appendix T, that you get to test the initiative with no risk to the corporation, and then, if it's a success, you operationalize it and roll it out across the country.

So those are some of the retail initiatives that we've been able to look at. For a while Canada Post was excited about the retail initiatives. I remember a couple of years ago going to these blueskies meetings, where they were talking about really making the retail sector vibrant and really expanding and putting in place these flagship stores. Then all of a sudden, just like that, they went in the opposite direction. Two weeks ago we got 22 notices in the Toronto area for new private sector franchises—22 on one day—at the same time they're eliminating 17 full-time, unionized wicket positions in the corporate outlets.

● (0945)

Mr. Geoff Bickerton (Director of Research, Canadian Union of Postal Workers): At the delivery end—and I think this goes back to your colleague's question about competitive services—we negotiated a collective agreement in the year 2000 involving the establishment of several pilot projects, where we would attempt different things with the corporation. We would change our collective agreement on a temporary basis and try to do things differently. We ended up having an experiment in Winnipeg where we contracted in the delivery of an X-ray parcel project, which basically doubled the number of parcels delivered by Canada Post employees. Part of that involved a new delivery model and a lot of changes to our collective agreement, including delivery on weekends. It was a success, and in our last round of bargaining we brought this in and expanded it to the entire country. So right now Canada Post has invested about \$50 million in the parcel delivery business, and we're changing our

operations in all of the major centres, including changing our work rules.

In terms of delivery of letters, in Burlington, Ontario, we had a pilot project where we motorized the delivery of mail and basically put letter carriers into small vehicles, and we also attempted to deliver all the mail before 1 o'clock in the afternoon. It meant having our letter carriers start at 4 o'clock and 5 o'clock in the morning. We also had another project out in Kelowna that involved a lot of different delivery rules.

So I think, in general, we're very open, including in terms of what Sister Bourque said. We were the first post office in the world to have Internet access inside public post offices. We don't have very much of that any more, but we were the first to introduce it in the 1990s. I think we're very proud of the fact that our union has been able to work with the corporation for the last decade in attempting to introduce new services to the public.

Ms. Peggy Nash: Madam Chair, do I have any further time?

● (0950)

The Chair: Very short.... I've been very lenient.

Ms. Peggy Nash: Thank you.

A person in my riding raised with me this issue about the re-mailers that you refer to. Can you talk a little further about that? He was saying he wanted to get into this business. I don't really know much about it, but I'm glad to have the opportunity to ask you about it.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I'm afraid to say I don't know a whole lot about it myself. The basic premise is that these companies, re-mailers, are incorrectly described as small businesses—some of them may be small businesses—but there is a challenge going on right now against Canada Post's exclusive privilege applying to international mail. Re-mailers collect mail in Canada, ship it to another country, either the United States or to a developing country where there are lower postage rates, and then mail the mail back to Canada from there to take advantage of the lower postage rates.

One, this really undermines Canada Post's exclusive privilege. It takes revenues out of the public corporation. But two, many of those developing countries have lower postage rates under the universal postal union for very good reasons: to deal with the economic and social realities of those countries. We're seeing the re-mailers take advantage of that to make a profit. Again, it's a situation where private competitors are attacking Canada Post's exclusive privilege without being prepared to take on the universal service obligations Canada Post is bound by.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Monsieur Proulx.

[Translation]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

Good morning, Mrs. Bourque. Good morning, Mr. Bickerton.

I'm very happy you're here this morning because I've had a problem for a few years and I hope you're going to help me solve it. I'm sure you're aware of members of Parliament's privileges with regard to what we call householders. We are allowed four a year. I'd like to know from you if your members consider householders first-class mail or whatever other class there might be—third class or fourth class or whatever, junk mail. I'm sure in some ridings, not held by Liberals, of course, it would be considered anything but householder. Is it first-class mail?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I don't like to use the term “junk mail”. I don't consider advertising mail and householders to be junk mail. They're not first-class mail, but they certainly are the future.

Advertising mail contributes significantly to the revenues of Canada Post, and advertising mail is more and more the bulk of the mail carried in our members' mailbags. I should say we need to find ways to make the delivery of householders easier, safer for our members, because to be frank with the committee, a lot of our members see householders as a real pain in terms of how they deliver them.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Excuse me. When you're talking of householder, you're actually referring to our mail-outs, which we call householders.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I think your mail is considered first-class mail.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: When I'm talking of a householder, this is the term we use under our parliamentary privileges.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: It's the franking privileges; you don't have to pay postage.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: We have franking privileges on all our mail, but we are also allowed, four times a year....

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes, that's considered a householder.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: That's considered a householder; therefore, it's not first class.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: No. First-class letter mail is stamped mail in an envelope that requires 51¢ postage. I don't know if it's still called first-class letter mail.

It's not. It's called “the communications product”, as opposed to the “distribution product”, which are the parcels.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Therefore, my householder I send out four times a year is not considered whatever you want to call it, first-class mail or whatever.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Right.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: That would explain why some of your members choose not to deliver them. Why don't they?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: The only real difference in the handling of first-class letter mail and the handling of householders is that there's a different delivery standard.

There's a clean-floor policy, which says that the letter carrier has to take all of the first-class letter mail that's in their case out when they leave for the day. With the householder mail or advertising mail, they're given three days. They take a third of that mail each day, because of the load, the overburdening.

● (0955)

Mr. Marcel Proulx: I appreciate that, but what gives them the right to decide not to deliver them?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: They don't have the right to decide not to deliver them, and if they fail to deliver householders, Canada Post will fire them.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Do you as a union have ways of controlling quality of your members' work or services?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: No. That's management's job, to manage the workplace.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: You do not monitor the quality of their work?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: We have supervisory staff in the workplace. Our members are working; they don't have time to monitor their co-workers. Certainly if we see real service issues, if we see trends that we think are really going to have an impact on service, then we talk to our members about that, but it's certainly not our role in the workplace to do that.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Let's take another example. Let's take the example in election time of what is called a voter's card, which is a very small-sized sort of postcard. When they go into apartment buildings, are your members supposed to deliver these to each and every individual mailbox? I'm not talking about doors on 15 floors; I'm talking about mailboxes within a mailroom. Are they supposed to slip them in the mailboxes?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Why do they take the liberty of leaving them in a package on the floor?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I've never carried mail. I was an inside clerk and I was a wicket clerk. But I know there is a lot of overburdening, and many of our members are finding it hard to complete their day and to deliver all their mail in their workday.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Maybe they should be replaced.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Canada Post has that option, and Canada Post isn't shy about disciplining our members for failing to meet their job functions, for failing to provide a service, and for failing to do their job. Canada Post will discipline them.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Do I hear from you, Mrs. Bourque, that if I complain to Canada Post in an election campaign that they have not delivered the voter's card to every individual mailbox, if I were to complain to Canada Post and Canada Post were to decide to fire that particular employee, your union would not put in a grievance, your union would not complain, and your union would let Canada Post fire that employee?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: That would depend on the circumstances surrounding the discipline. That would depend on the employee's previous record. It would depend on—

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Because if he has a better record, he's allowed to make mistakes.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Can I finish?

It would depend on the employee's record in terms of progressive discipline. This is arbitral law. It would depend on the jurisprudence in the particular case. It would depend on the nature of the offence. It would depend on the nature of the penalty. We make decisions every day on discharge cases—whether or not to file a grievance, whether or not to actually take that grievance to third-party arbitration. We sometimes say no. We sometimes say yes, that the penalty was too severe, or whatever. Unions make these decisions every day in terms of discharge and discipline.

We have an obligation under the Canada industrial relations regulations. We have a duty of fair representation to all our members. So whenever a member is disciplined, we have an obligation to seriously review that file and make that decision, based on all the information we have and the jurisprudence. If we don't take the grievance, our member has the right to go before the Canada Industrial Relations Board, and they're not shy about doing that either. They do that, and we put our case before the board.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Am I done? So quick. I'll be back.

The Chair: So quick, yes.

Mr. Wallace, go ahead, please.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for coming this morning.

I have a different area I'd like to explore with you. I did a bit of research, and based on the information that has been provided to me, the employees at Canada Post average about 15.5 sick days a year. When you look at other sectors, the one that comes closest to you is transportation and warehousing at 11 days a year. If you look at public administration, it's at 10, manufacturing is at 10. The actual average for a Canadian worker is 7.5 days.

Now, to me, an extra week of sick days seems to represent a fairly high absentee rate. I want to know what the union is doing, if anything, to try to improve on that record. The number is fairly high compared to other industrial sectors, considering you're in a very competitive business now and productivity is an issue for both management and the union.

• (1000)

Mr. Geoff Bickerton: I don't know where you got your figure, but it's incorrect. The average use of sick leave by our membership in the urban agreement is 11-point something. I'm sorry, but I don't know the exact percentage. The reality is that the average member in our

bargaining unit who retires and who has worked for 30 years usually retires with about 120 days of accumulated sick leave without getting paid anything out of it.

I deal with bargaining and with information that we get from Canada Post, and I'd be more than willing to look at your figures.

You're talking about paid days of sick leave?

Mr. Mike Wallace: According to Canada Post, the rate of absenteeism of all employees, which includes non-union employees, of course, is 15.5 days a year.

Mr. Geoff Bickerton: You said sick leave. You didn't say—

Mr. Mike Wallace: It's absenteeism, and that's the same comparison I'm doing here.

Mr. Geoff Bickerton: If you take a look at absenteeism, then you'd be looking at other things like bereavement leave and special leave for various other things. That would make some sense.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Would you agree, though, that you're way ahead of other industries in terms of that?

Mr. Geoff Bickerton: No. You used an average number of 7.5 days for the country. Again, I'd be glad to come back to you on this, but as I understand it, in the study that Stats Canada did of unionized workforces—which are the workforces where people can avail themselves of various forms of paid leave—the average is much more in line with ours. As a matter of fact, I actually thought we were slightly below the national average—but again, I'd be more than happy to get into these figures with you.

Mr. Mike Wallace: I understand that you like to compare yourselves with other unionized environments. I actually come from a household that's unionized—though we don't always agree.

My issue with Canada Post is that you are in a very competitive business, and you are competing against private sector productivity also—and not all of the private sector is unionized, as you know.

So you're coming into a negotiation and you're telling me that from the membership's point of view, you don't find the absenteeism rate an issue for your union at this particular moment?

Mr. Geoff Bickerton: I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. The issue for us of workplace injuries, workplace illnesses, or work-related illnesses is a very important issue. We do a lot, I have to say, to try to improve working conditions. We're very active around trying to deal with anything that could possibly result in a reduction of work-related illnesses or workplace accidents.

I'm sure you can appreciate that the vast majority of the work of our membership is outside, working in the elements during nice days like today and in cold weather, and also inside, working on the night shift. I'm sure you're aware that all of the figures and studies that you can look at will show there's a higher rate of illness among people who do night shift work.

Mr. Mike Wallace: I also come from a shift work household. When you mention the outside, you know, construction is at 8.3 days of sick leave, and there isn't much more physical activity, both indoors and outdoors, than that.

But let me move off that. Thank you very much for your answer.

I have two more quick questions. What's your view of the employment engagement that Canada Post is undertaking? Have you been engaged in that yet? Do you know much about it at this particular moment? I think it's relatively new, but I'm not positive of that.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: We'd like to see some management-union engagement. We'd like to see some of that!

In fact, I don't know a lot about the employee engagement program. So far it's manifested itself by having the president and some senior vice-presidents go around and visit the various workplaces.

•(1005)

Mr. Mike Wallace: Okay.

My final question is that in your discussion you talked about coming up to negotiations and that the feeling between management and the union is strained compared with how it has been over the last decade, but you also said that's at the national level. So are you telling me that the rank-and-file employees are pretty happy working for Canada Post?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: No, actually, my comment was just the opposite. I'm sorry if I wasn't articulate on that. What I said was that over the last decade we've enjoyed relative labour peace, at least at the national level. That hasn't always reflected itself at the shop floor or at the local level. My point was—

Mr. Mike Wallace: So I have it backwards, then?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes, it was backwards.

Things got better over the last decade at the national level, more than they did at the local level. We were just—

Mr. Marcel Proulx: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Mike Wallace: I heard that.

Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Bonin.

Mr. Raymond Bonin (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're at five minutes now.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Bonin: Mrs. Bourque and Mr. Bickerton, I thank you for your presence this morning.

I would like to come back to the matter of the postal service in rural areas. That situation has happened in my riding. The day the complaint is lodged, mail delivery stops. There's a reason to that. One could claim that the situation is dangerous today, that a solution will be found and that mail will stop being delivered a month from now. It's dangerous, it has to stop immediately.

This has happened in my riding and, since there are 52 communities, it will certainly happen again somewhere else.

[*English*]

The problem is only starting across the country. I had one situation, and I have 52 communities.

I have two questions. One of them is, what is the process for logging a complaint? It's not even a complaint, it's a statement that they will not deliver because it's dangerous, and then the employer has no choice but to cut deliveries. Canada Post knows, and the union knows, that my other 51 communities are going to have the same problem. I'd like to know—and I will ask the same question of management, so in all fairness I'm telling you that now—what efforts are being made to prevent that problem, because every time there's a problem, the people around this table are the ones who get the calls.

When the situation arose in my riding, it wasn't Canada Post's problem. Their solution was: "Make a choice. You go to the post office or you have community mailboxes." That's their policy, and it is an alternative. The union position is that they don't deliver because it's dangerous. What real honest effort has been made by the employer, and by the union, to attempt to prevent this problem spreading across the country? Because we know it will.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: In terms of the process, the right to refuse unsafe work under the Canada Labour Code is an individual right; it's not a collective right.

Mr. Raymond Bonin: It's not the individuals who said they were not delivering; it's the union who said that.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: No, sorry, that's incorrect.

Mr. Raymond Bonin: You'd better talk to your local representatives.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: We've always been clear with our members that they have rights under the Canada Labour Code and that they are not expected to put their health and safety at risk. Any union will tell their members, "You protect yourself. You have rights"—

Mr. Raymond Bonin: That's not my question.

What is the process? Does the individual go directly to Labour Canada, or does he do it through the union?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: They first go to their supervisor.

Mr. Raymond Bonin: Which is the employer.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes, the employer. They go to the supervisor, and I guess it's the supervisor who brings in Labour Canada. If Labour Canada comes in and says this is unsafe, the employee has the right to refuse to do that work. Or they say it's safe and go back and do the job.

Mr. Raymond Bonin: Okay. So the union is not involved in that process?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Not unless the member decides they want to take a union representative with them for their protection when they speak with management. That's where the union would get involved, but it's the individual who invokes the right to refuse.

I want to talk to you a bit about how we would see this happening in the future.

•(1010)

Mr. Raymond Bonin: We have five minutes, and I'm really interested in the attempts to prevent the problems.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Okay. That's what I'm going to talk to you about.

What we'd like to see is the involvement of the local joint health and safety committees that are structured under the Canada Labour Code. They're in every workplace and they're accessible in those workplaces. We would like to see those local joint health and safety committees review the routes to identify the problem spots. As I think I said earlier, not every household on the route is dangerous to deliver to; frequently, it's only a small number of them.

The local committees need to consult with the households that have been identified as problems and develop solutions on a case-by-case basis. There's no blanket one-size-fits-all solution to this problem. Then, when an RSMC exercises his or her right to refuse, Canada Post needs to cease its practice of having all the mail on the route relocated. It's not necessary. We would argue that the committee—

Mr. Raymond Bonin: That's interesting, but it's not what I'm concerned about.

I would like to hear what attempts you have made with the employer to prevent these problems. Then I want to go to the employer and say, "The union offered you a way to prevent these problems. Why do you not listen to them?"

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: And that's what we're doing.

Mr. Raymond Bonin: No, you're telling me what you'd like to see.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: We want the local joint health and safety committees involved.

Mr. Raymond Bonin: I just want to know what attempts you've made with the employer.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Our health and safety department has been working with Canada Post ever since this problem surfaced. Three of our representatives spent two weeks in Fredericton driving around and looking at every route, because Canada Post pulled mail delivery from 1,100 households last week. We had them drive around and look at every one of those delivery points on those routes.

We're involved in some discussion around an ergonomic study that was done by the National Research Council. We're trying to work out a process right now and reach agreement with Canada Post. We agree that there needs to be....

If by preventing the problem you mean stopping the complaints—

Mr. Raymond Bonin: No, what I mean is...I'll make something up. You are the president and say to me, "I sat with the director of Canada Post and offered that we work together to prevent this". Then I'd like to say to them, "Why in hell won't you sit with the union and solve the problem?"

I want to know what real attempts have been made by either side to prevent this problem.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: We have been doing that. Our national union representative—

Mr. Raymond Bonin: Tell me so I can put it in their face.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Well, it hasn't been me at the table on this. We have a national union representative who's responsible for health and safety. We have a transition committee that works on rural and suburban mail carrier issues. They've been really involved in working with Canada Post at the VP level and at the health and safety rep level at the national joint health and safety committee. They've been working with Canada Post to try to resolve this problem. We've made proposals on how to involve the local joint health and safety committees in this problem, where we would develop a speedy way of dealing with concerns.

We've just negotiated a tentative agreement with Canada Post in the first reopener on the RSMC collective agreement. That involves a work measurement system that will study each and every function on each and every route in structuring the days properly. That has to be done anyway. Every single route across the country is going to have to be looked at. So I would argue that as we're looking at that route and trying to identify the amount of time it takes to deliver that route, we would also look at and identify the health and safety concerns and the problem areas. There are lots of ways for us to work together to resolve this.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mrs. Thibault.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will now come to my second point. It will be very brief.

People can look at the committees' Web site and see that on June 1st, at the Standing committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, Mrs. Greene, in answer to a question relating to a reorganization plan and a new strategy, stated that some studies had been made by an independent company called IBM. In your introduction, you stated that there did not seem to be many consultations between the CEO, management and the union. Mrs. Greene said that the studies were being done by an independent firm called IBM. Have you been made aware of those studies so that, when operational decisions are made, you would know the reasons why they were made? Were you made aware of those studies in the past but not anymore?

•(1015)

[English]

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: We haven't been provided with this IBM study. I don't think there's a consistent approach to providing the union with studies. Sometimes we get them and sometimes we don't.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Those were done to study the level of service and to know if it was achieved. That's very important. When I was a manager, in my previous life, I wanted to know those things. My counterpart had to be informed if I wanted to tell him that we wanted to improve the level of service and if I believed that our workers, unionized or not, were not performing well enough. So, you're not aware of those.

At the same committee meeting, there was another very relevant question relating to equal treatment at the Quebec City sorting plant. Someone asked Mrs. Greene if she thought that there should be fairness of treatment between all the regions, whether they be the Maritimes, the West, Quebec or Ontario. Mrs. Greene answered that equal treatment had nothing to do with managing an organization such as Canada Post. What's your opinion? Do you think it's an important criterion that should be taken into account? Your answer can be very short. I don't need a long answer.

[English]

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes, I think fairness and equality are important principles, and I would argue they are part of what the universal service obligation speaks to—equality of service, no matter where you live, whether in a rural or urban community.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: In one of the documents we've been provided, I read that on February 1st—and I had already read that in the papers—Canada Post violated clause 29 of the collective agreement—that was an arbitration judgment by Mr. Dulude. Then, a judicial review was requested. Has that been done and, if so, do we know the result?

[English]

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: You're speaking about arbitrator Dulude's arbitration decision. Canada Post has appealed that, or has sought judicial review of that decision.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: it's not been done yet? There's been no decision on appeal?

[English]

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: No, there have been hearings.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: How long will it take?

[English]

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: It depends on the complexity of the arguments and the amount of evidence. So I'm not sure how long that judicial review would take.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: That's all for now, Madam Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Thank you very much, Madam Chairperson.

Thank you for coming in today. I appreciate, obviously, that you are on the hot seat and that you're coming up, so far, with most of the answers to our questions.

I just want to carry on from Mr. Bonin. He had a number of questions that he asked, but his final question, basically, was what is the union doing to ensure that in the future our postal workers can continue to do their jobs well and that they won't continually come back with the same issues? I live in a rural community. I represent a large rural population in my constituency, and I would suggest that over 50% of the mail delivered there is by rural carriers. In a number of places, we have seen these centralized boxes or pavilions being put into place to have communities come and collect their mail.

You talked at some length about the necessity of ensuring a safe workplace. I would just suggest—and I'm wondering what the union's position is on this—that I can't foresee a time when we will ensure that every rural postal box is a safe situation. Obviously we have changing weather patterns; on a daily basis these conditions can change very rapidly. We have road conditions, especially in the winter, that can change, and certainly from the union's position.... My question would be, is the union prepared to go to centralized mail delivery for all rural communities, if that's what is necessary to ensure safety, or are we going to work with the understanding that there's going to be reasonable risk in the future, especially in rural communities, and that it's going to continue forever? It's never going to change; we're always going to have icy roads and we're always going to have snowbanks piled up against certain postal boxes, causing ongoing problems.

I'm wondering if the union has a long-term position to ensure, number one, that we don't have to move to these centralized postal boxes, or, number two, does it have a plan to push to ensure that all rural communities are served by these centralized postal boxes?

• (1020)

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Well, I'm quite proud of my union's record for the past 25 years of fighting to defend rural delivery, both delivery to rural mailboxes and the maintenance of post offices in rural communities. We've been pretty consistent on that for the last couple of decades, and my union would oppose vigorously any attempt by Canada Post to put rural delivery into community mailboxes.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: It seems as though there's a contradiction under these unsafe situations that can arise at any point. I'm just wondering, in the end, how the union will rule. Will they say they will now move towards these centralized mailboxes, or—

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: No, because we don't think it's necessary.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Well, I would suggest that at some point... I think we're just at the tip of the iceberg; I think we're just now seeing these postal workers feeling they are not safe, but I don't think the conditions have become any more unsafe over the years. I think what's happening is that there's just a realization that this work environment maybe isn't comfortable to the people who are now taking these positions. I wouldn't suggest that rural roads have become any more treacherous; I would suggest that in fact they have become more safe, and I actually think that postal boxes have become more accessible—at least in my community. What is being complained about now was never complained about in the past.

I'm wondering, as we approach winter, if my communities are all of a sudden going to experience major delays. Maybe we're just going to have all of the rural communities shut down for the whole winter and we'll bring it up in the spring again.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: With all due respect, that's simply absurd. We're not arguing that every rural route is unsafe or that even every home on particular routes is unsafe.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I understand that, but I guess—

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Labour Canada doesn't rule on comfort issues; Labour Canada rules on whether or not the worker is unsafe.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I'm not suggesting comfort issues; I'm talking about issues that might be safety concerns. I have great respect for people who go out in snowstorms to deliver mail. I'm wondering if people are going to be more aware that these are unsafe situations, and if we're going to have more and more complaints and more and more communities going to centralized boxes.

What is the balancing act, and what is the union going to do to prepare itself for this inevitable balancing act?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: We do agree it's a balancing act. We have to balance the entitlement of rural residents to home delivery, quality public postal service, and good delivery and good service with the right of our members, under the law, to have a healthy and safe workplace. Workers have that right under the law in this country. It is a balance that needs to be found. I'm telling this committee that my union is committed to finding solutions with Canada Post that continue to provide home delivery to rural communities and continue to respect the health and safety of our members.

We will never be able to eliminate every risk or every potential risk from every job. There are always going to be traffic accidents; there are always going to be weather conditions. What we need to do is work with Canada Post to make those routes absolutely as safe as they can be made, and absolutely minimize the threat of any danger to our members, as we do with the urban group.

• (1025)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Alghabra has agreed to waive his turn so that we have time to debate his motion; therefore, I'll go to Mr. Albrecht.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to Ms. Bourque and Mr. Bickerton for coming.

Representing a riding that's rural and urban and suburban, I want to highlight the importance of continuing rural delivery, and I support moratoriums on the closure of rural post offices.

However, I am concerned about the safety issues you've outlined. How many right-hand delivery vehicles has Canada Post tested? I understand some right-hand delivery vehicles have been tested.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: A number of our members, not all of them, in the urban operations bargaining unit deliver mail in right-hand-drive vehicles.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: But there are no rural ones at this point.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: No. Our rural members are required to provide their own vehicles; it's a holdover from when they were independent contractors.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: All right. The second question has a little different angle. What criteria are in place for a suburban area where new housing has developed and they currently have these superboxes? At what point does home delivery become...? Is there a formula, or is it a case-by-case decision? I'm interested in knowing what's followed there.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Yes, there used to be a formula: any community of 2,000 or more points of call automatically got door-to-door delivery. Unfortunately, that fell by the wayside about 10 or 15 years ago when Canada Post started putting community mailboxes or supermailboxes, as they called them back then, into all new developments. There are really absurd situations where our members provide door-to-door delivery on one street, walk past another street that has community mailboxes, and deliver door to door.

Canada Post has tended not to expand door-to-door delivery. We've worked very hard with the communities and with community organizations to try to get more door-to-door delivery. We believe people in this country are entitled to door-to-door delivery for a whole number of good reasons: seniors, people with disabilities, people with kids—they ought to get home delivery. We think there should be a formula, because there's no formula and no explanation for how it works now.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: As a member of Parliament representing a suburban area, what could I do to influence Canada Post to bring that kind of delivery to a certain area? It would have to be on a case-by-case basis, you say.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I guess so, unless this committee wants to recommend some kind of formula for door-to-door delivery, and we could certainly work with you on that. But I guess your option is to complain to Canada Post and mobilize the community. If the community mobilizes itself and puts pressure on Canada Post, it may be able to achieve door-to-door delivery.

Mr. Geoff Bickerton: The 1989 Postal Services Review Committee, which was established by the government of the time, looked at this issue and recommended that Canada Post put aside a certain amount of its profits and use that to expand door-to-door delivery in those areas where it would be feasible.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go to Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: I'm sorry, Madam Chair. I thought we were going to have a debates and I did not prepare any other questions. I will pass for now.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

Madam Nash.

Ms. Peggy Nash: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Yes, we've had a lot of questions about rural delivery. I've heard you say that it is quite possible to maintain door-to-door, or in essence mailbox-to-mailbox, rural delivery and protect people's health and safety, and that one needn't be sacrificed for the other.

But what I have also heard you say is that there is the potential to undermine rural delivery by privatizing some of the more profitable, lucrative urban mail services. I'm wondering if you could talk a bit more about that, because it seems to me that the universal provision of Canada Post's services is something that was put in place by our grandparents, I suppose, or great-grandparents, when they set up this service as a nation-building exercise, with the provision that everyone in the country, no matter where they lived, would have equal access, at the same price, to mail service.

We've heard that with these community boxes it is already being undermined to some degree. Can you describe a little more fully your concern about the potential to undermine rural delivery service through the privatization of the lucrative urban service?

•(1030)

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I think a good example of this is United Parcel Service's complaint under the North American Free Trade Agreement. If they win, or if the Canadian government settles the case before the tribunal, then what will likely happen is that UPS will have access to Canada Post's infrastructure and the urban markets. The problem is that they'll maximize their profits in those lucrative urban areas at Canada Post's expense, and Canada Post needs the profits it makes in urban areas to finance the universal service obligation. It costs a lot of money to deliver to rural communities. Even if you pay rural deliverers low wages, it still costs a lot of money to deliver. So Canada Post needs the profits it makes in downtown Toronto to continue to be able to provide rural mail delivery.

If competitors like UPS do get access to that market, that will undermine the universal service obligation. And I should say that the universal service obligation is an international obligation. It's like a treaty under the United Nations, through the Universal Postal Union. All national postal administrations are members of the Universal Postal Union, and they're bound by the universal service obligation.

Ms. Peggy Nash: Are you saying that if the lucrative urban markets are privatized, or if there is that competition, then to maintain that commitment and provide service in rural markets, it could in fact take higher taxes to provide that service, which there is an absolute obligation to provide?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Well, yes. We would hate to see Canada Post go back to the days when it was a drain on the public purse. And it hasn't been. Canada Post has had 11 consecutive years of

profits. So yes, Canada Post would have to find the revenues somewhere to continue to provide universal service, or it would have to pull back. It would have to undermine that universal service. It would have to pull back on rural delivery and maybe go to three days a week or two days a week in rural communities.

The Chair: Ms. Gallant, go ahead, please.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and through you, Ms. Bourque.

I represent a rural Ontario riding, Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke. Rural mail service is an important issue in my constituency, but unlike in the situation of urban dwellers, the information highway has yet to be built in large sections of my riding, and high-speed broadband is on our wish list.

Ever since rural mail carriers became Canada Post employees and members of CUPW, so-called health and safety issues are resulting in more and more rural households being denied mail service. I have situations in which seniors who used to have their mail delivered to the end of their driveway now have to walk half a mile to pick it up. This is particularly treacherous in the winter. Residents on Schutt Road in the Palmer Rapids area of Renfrew County now have a large grey mailbox, whereas they had home delivery previously.

On behalf of people like Bernice Liedtke, Doug, Don, Aaron, and Lawrence Marquardt, what is the official position of your union on the problem of not delivering mail for safety reasons in places where no problem existed previously?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I'm not convinced that there wasn't a problem previously. These routes didn't become unsafe overnight. There were problems in the past. The problem is people were afraid to raise their complaints because their contracts could be terminated without cause. They weren't covered by the just cause provisions of the Canada Labour Code. These workers had no rights. They were independent contactors. They couldn't complain. If they did complain, they were told to go find another job.

They now have some rights under the Canada Labour Code to protect their health and safety, but our commitment is to work with Canada Post to make sure that seniors, in communities like those, don't have to walk half a mile to pick up their mail, and to consider the needs of our members' health and safety while continuing to provide quality service to those residents.

•(1035)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: On a curve or where there's no shoulder, there may be a safety factor. Prior to bringing the issue to Labour Canada, did members make the suggestion to move the individual mail boxes that were a problem, to set them back so that the potentially hazardous location was avoided? Was that a suggestion, or did they go directly and make the complaint, which resulted in this?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I don't know. I would assume that those discussions had taken place. I can't say specifically that every rural route mail courier who invoked their right to refuse had taken those steps, but these folks know the work they do, and they know their communities.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Limited—

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: Sorry.

Geoff, did you have something to add to that?

Mr. Geoff Bickerton: I just wanted to add that there's a real equity issue here in what you're identifying. In the urban areas we have letter carriers every day, somewhere in the country, who go back to their office and say they have a household at which the steps have become rotten, or they have a household at which the dogs are not tied up, and the response of Canada Post is not to shut down delivery for the whole route. The response of Canada Post is to deal with the single individual health and safety problem that's been identified. I think what you're saying is that quite often our members have been identifying individual residences that have a health and safety problem, but what's happened is that the delivery has been shut down to a much greater area.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: On the issue of urban delivery, in urban centres situated within rural areas, postal carriers will walk up a set of stairs or take an elevator to deliver mail to other levels in commercial buildings, yet they won't walk down the road. When constituents phone the postmaster, they're told that the union forbids them to deliver on different levels of certain commercial buildings.

So again, my question is, would that be a safety issue, to refuse delivery to different levels of buildings where there are no rotten stairs, or...?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: I would suspect that's the way the route has been structured. Some routes are structured such that you deliver to mailboxes in the box lobby. Some routes are structured such that you deliver door to door in the apartment building or the business building. I can't imagine that we would have the right to refuse to deliver in those cases. It depends on how the route is structured.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Does the union play a role in determining the route structure, or is that dictated by Canada Post management?

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: We have a role to play in that we are permitted to have observers when routes are restructured. We have the right under the collective agreement to review the information, but it's ultimately the route measurement officer from Canada Post who does the actual building of the walk. We take those opportunities when routes are being restructured to argue that door-to-door delivery should be put in place and people should go to every door.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We've finished the time. You've had almost six minutes now. We're down to five, and we have another motion to debate. I'm sorry.

Before you leave, I would hope that after we were really in favour of seeing these contractors unionized, we don't now see the demise of postal service in the rural areas. I'm extremely concerned, and I would hope that you would work with management to ensure that this stops, because it's just happening too much. If we have one message to send you, it's that we have to find a way to continue that delivery service. It's absolutely essential to this country.

Mrs. Deborah Bourque: If I have one message to leave you, it's that we're absolutely committed to that.

The Chair: We'll give the same message to management when they come.

Thank you very much.

Now, rather than break, we will go to the motion right away.

Mr. Alghabra, would you like to move your motion?

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Yes. I just want to preface by saying that last week we had witnesses to the committee talk about Public Works' responsibilities in managing the facilities that several government departments look after, and we looked at certain scenarios in which perhaps the government or the administration could have spent taxpayers' money better or more efficiently. I want to take the opportunity to assert the committee's recommendation in holding the department to and reminding the department of its responsibility to manage taxpayers' money.

I am proposing this motion, and it reads:

That the Committee report to the House that it recommends that the acquisition, by purchase or lease, of any significant property, such as the former JDS Uniphase campus in Ottawa by the Government of Canada for use by its departments and agencies, be the result of a competitive public call for tenders process.

● (1040)

The Chair: Thank you.

Is there any debate?

I'll go to Madame Thibault, and then I'll go to Mr. Kramp.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Thibault: I only wanted to have some clarification. I don't know if this is the right time but you'll tell me.

When I compare the English and French versions of the motion, I see that with we're talking in English of "significant property"—and there's an example in the motion—relating to what is called real estate? In French, it's not the same thing at all. They're talking of "*biens considérables*", which means considerable goods. I'm sure that the translators can do better than me but I believe that this should be replaced by "*des biens immobiliers d'importance*". That's the amendment I would suggest for the French version.

The Chair: You're absolutely right.

Ms. Louise Thibault: In English, I would suggest "significant real estate property", unless Mr. Alghabra wants it to apply to any type of property, whether it be airplanes, ships or helicopters, which would be different. In that case, someone might come back with another motion on those issues. However, if we want to talk about real estate only, I would suggest that amendment. Obviously, I will accept the decision of our interpreters.

The Chair: So, it would read "*biens immobiliers d'importance*". Does everybody agree with that change?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Done. Thank you.

Ms. Louise Thibault: I'm sorry, I'm not finished. That amendment related to the words used.

About the motion itself, I agree with it for three reasons. First, one can't be against virtue. We hear a lot of talk about transparency, with good reason. It is essential. Second, this will lead, I hope—and I referred it to it when we discussed Canada Post—to equal treatment. Obviously, I'm referring here to equal treatment of bidders. I mentioned it during our last meeting. When there is a competitive bid, property owners from both sides of the river who want to rent or sell to the government want to be able to participate. When I look at the situation about which we've received lots of information, I believe it will be necessary at some point to do a study. If we operate in this manner, there will be less need in the future to carry out studies about the past. We would be protected, and taxpayers would be protected.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kramp, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd actually like to make a few comments in opposition to this motion.

Madam Thibault, touching on the amendment that you made on the wording, right off the bat, what is significant property? How are we going to define it? What are the parameters going to be? Is it \$1 million, \$2 million, \$5 million, \$10 million, or \$100 million? What are we going to set it at, and who's going to make those decisions?

One concern I have with this motion is that it's certainly open-ended. Where are we going to go? We can run off in a witch hunt or we can actually accomplish something. That's one point.

The Chair: Mr. Kramp, I know you're concerned, but there are some very strict rules within Public Works on what goes to tender, in what amounts, and so on. It's not as big a challenge as you think.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: That's fine. I appreciate the intervention, Madam Chair.

My next point will perhaps lead us right there.

Like my colleague, I have no difficulty at all with openness and transparency. I think we've all seen too much of that, and we're all clearly focused on preventing it from happening again.

A voice: It's corruption, not transparency.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Thank you. It's corruption. I don't want to go down that path.

We heard testimony last week, and this motion flies right in the face of testimony from our ministers and deputy ministers. We heard on many occasions that the exception is not the norm. This takes away the latitude.

Madam Chair, you were a minister. When unique occasions like this would come up, you and other ministers would be responsible. What should we do? Should we now call all of the past ministers who have made decisions like this? Many decisions have been made

by the previous government in a like-minded process. Do we go back and look at all of their decisions to see if every one did not follow one of these potential exceptions? A number of these potential exceptions could have a negative impact for the present government on that deal.

I'd quickly make three or four little points.

One is the fact that this was not a regular market opportunity. This was an unsolicited proposal that came forward to the government in which all of a sudden the information came to them. They then had an obligation to take a look at this, and it was not through the normal market procedure, right off the bat.

I think we all recognize that it's a unique facility. These are not dime a dozen, routine warehouses or another building that has to house another ministry. The demands of this particular ministry are absolutely off the wall, and they need particular requirements. It's why we have a bureaucracy in place, and it's why we have public works, to evaluate all of those circumstances and situations to see if it's something that should be brought forward.

Madam Chair, there are also a number of occasions when we have an existing building, and sometimes it can be a bargain. If you're going to go through the entire process of tendering, planning, building, designing, and construction, the cost-effectiveness can be absolutely onerous.

We basically have a building per se that could be bought for a few cents on the dollar or a few dollars on the dollar, whatever the quantification would be, but the bottom line, obviously, is that it's not at market price. We all know this, and the deputy minister replied. This is not a \$600 purchase building. That's the figure that has been bandied about.

We all recognize the enormous costs involved, particularly when you have a department that has very serious demands, particularly with regard to security. We also have a schedule situation that definitely comes to bear on this.

In a competitive bidding process there are many people who might wish to be involved in this process. Sometimes the early bird catches the worm, and you're able to reach out and make a decision. In this particular case, a decision was reached by Public Works to be able to proceed with this.

This is not a decision made in isolation, and this is not a decision that is not open for public scrutiny. This is a decision that they will be held accountable to. The minister and the parliamentary secretary have already stated that this decision, if and when it has been ratified by cabinet, will come back to the committee and the House for scrutiny.

As well, we are aware that the Auditor General has already been asked to look into this matter and is in the middle of the process right now to fully evaluate this procedure.

To step in right now, throw a carte blanche across it, and tie the hands of this government or any future government at any particular time while seeking the best-value deal for this country, I believe is not fair to Quebec, Alberta, Ontario, or anywhere.

Your motion is a bad business decision, Mr. Alghabra. You're in business, and I've been a business person. Your motion is not good business. Quite honestly, Public Works is in the business of providing a value-for-dollar acquisition for this country.

•(1045)

Good business is making sound business decisions, at the right time, in the right place, taking into account all of the exceptions that have come forward before previous ministers of previous governments, and we should be aware that this process was—to their credit—established under the previous government. They're the ones who initiated this process for this deal, the previous government from which you bring forward the motion.

I find that mind-boggling. You're basically saying that our previous government didn't know what they were doing. Well, quite honestly, there are occasions when I would certainly hope that your previous ministers were able to pass some judgment and the deputy minister and the departments had some form of responsibility.

We all want openness and transparency. To my mind, there are plenty of avenues for that. The minister has stated as much. We will have the Auditor General's report on this issue, and we have ministerial responsibility, as dictated also by public accounts and now back before the House.

I feel that this basically might be well-intentioned and it sounds good, a motherhood issue, that we want transparency, and I have no difficulty with transparency, but you don't want to make a bad decision sometimes simply to play up political optics. To my mind, that, with all respect, is what this is.

Let's make a sound decision for this country. Let's get rid of the political optics and the political machinations here, and let's deal with this issue before us.

Thank you.

•(1050)

The Chair: Mr. Alghabra.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm actually enjoying watching the colleagues opposite speak up against transparency and accountability and being selective about it. This is not an issue about whether it was done under the previous government or this government. We're talking about a specific case. We had witnesses last week talk about certain issues.

What we're saying is that if it costs us another month, if this is the right property—and it could be, and it probably is the right property—why don't we just put specifications together and ask for a public tender process, and then we may end up with the right decision? There is nothing wrong with that.

Madam Chair, I'd ask that we move to a vote on this motion.

Mr. Mike Wallace: We have the right to speak to this motion.

The Chair: Madam Clerk, you have to advise me on this one. We have to put it to a vote when—

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Bibiane Ouellette): When there's debate and the members wish to speak—

The Chair: He has called for the vote.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Do we not have a right to speak on this issue?

I'd like to have a ruling from the chair that we are being denied a right to speak on this issue.

The Chair: No, but if you call for a vote, then what happens? Do we have to have the vote?

Mr. Raymond Bonin: We have a vote to see if we vote now.

The Chair: We have to have a vote to see if we vote now.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Is it debatable?

The Chair: Is this a point of order or a question?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: I guess it would be a point of clarification of a point of order. I see that the wording says “competitive public call for tenders process”. It's my understanding that when that's done—

The Chair: That's not a point of order, though.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Well, it is, because what I want to know is if he intends that the specific security requirements would be part of that transparency.

The Chair: Yes, obviously it would, if you go to tender.

I'm going to ask for a vote to see whether we should go ahead with the vote on this motion now.

Quorum? Oh, no, we have quorum.

(Motion agreed to)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Thibault: We're all here.

[*English*]

The Chair: We have a full complement of members.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: On a point of order, Madam Chair, I just want it on the record that I'm disagreeing with your interpretation or the clerk's interpretation of how we should proceed with this. What I am saying is that if the said procedure is correct, you are denying us the opportunity as a party to speak against this motion.

The Chair: If the vote passes, there will be continued debate in the House, because I'll have to report this to the House, and you'll have a chance there to defend it.

This is only a recommendation, by the way.

So I will call the vote. All those in favour of the motion?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: We have to debate this further.

An hon. member: They called the question on it.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: [*Inaudible—Editor*]...complex. I'm just curious. If I may just ask the—

The Chair: I can't tell you. I don't know.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I do need to seek some clarification on that.

The Chair: I've called the vote.

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: We'll call the meeting to an end. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

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