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Chair

Mr. Joe Preston

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): I call the meeting to order, please.

We have two witnesses today, and we have two hours for our meeting. We're starting a little late and there is another committee right in here at one o'clock, so there is no chance for us to go over today either. I know that because I have to be here for that committee meeting too.

I welcome you all. I welcome our witness.

We're here pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(a) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, March 11, 2010, on the study of issues related to prorogation. This is the 13th meeting of the procedure and House affairs committee.

I thank you for all your hard work.

Mr. White, if you'll give me just another minute before I get you to start, I have some news.

Michel, our regular researcher, is not here today. Michel's wife had a baby girl, named Rose, last night—

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: —a sister to her brother Charles. The baby was eight pounds. The baby is already keeping him up late, of course. The real work starts for him now.

We'll wish him well when he comes back, and if I have the permission of the committee, maybe we'll send him a letter, wishing him well and congratulating his wife on all the hard work too.

With that, Mr. White, we're happy to have you here today. I'll give you a chance for an opening statement and then we'll circulate around to the different parties to ask you questions. We'll go as close to noon as we can with you. And we thank you for travelling here and sharing information with us today.

Please, go ahead.

Mr. Christopher White (As an Individual): It's always a pleasure.

I'll just start with a bit of a brief I've prepared.

On January 23 a curious thing happened. Across the country, thousands of Canadians from all walks of life came together in the name of a routine parliamentary procedure that, up until a year ago, many had never even heard of.

[*Translation*]

We represented various political circles, unified by our interest to preserve democracy and keep the government responsible. Even if we were encouraged by politicians, we owe our success to our ability to organize ourselves, to debate and discuss on the Internet and in our committees.

[*English*]

Much has been made about the legitimacy of political engagement through social networking. Some have disparaged the 226,000 proud Canadians who signed into the “Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament” Facebook group. They said it was incredibly easy to simply click a “join” button, which is true, although I would add it is no more difficult than marking an X on a ballot, but none here would doubt the importance of the latter.

The low barrier of entry to online political participation is actually one of its strengths. Contacting members of Parliament, demonstrating, and circulating petitions can be intimidating at first. For many, CAPP was their first experience in political involvement and many are now self-professed political junkies. To any politician who pays more than lip service to citizen engagement, they should be encouraged by this and work towards finding ways to bring these tools to their constituents.

[*Translation*]

We showed that Canadians are very interested in our democracy and the way our Parliament works. We are not against prorogation as such, but we are against the flagrant abuse of power that was displayed in December 2009. It is now the responsibility of the House to find a solution to ensure that this does not happen again.

[*English*]

I recognize that any truly binding regulations would require opening up the Constitution, for which there does not seem to be an appetite. I favour proposals to introduce new conventions through the Standing Orders or legislation. Proposals to date have considered a maximum length for prorogation, when it can be called, and if it should require a vote.

At the foundation of any new convention should be that the House, the body that represents the will of Canadians, be given the power to decide when it does and does not sit. You cannot simply introduce a convention and expect it to stick. A convention, by its nature, is a voluntary practice reinforced through tradition and repeated use. Indeed, much of what guides our government is convention alone, an agreement by its actors to behave civilly and treat one another with respect in the interest of serving Canadians. Perhaps that's why we're in trouble.

The most common objection I've heard to CAPP is “So what? Who needs Parliament anyway?” This must give you cause for reflection, that some see your role as destructive at worse, and irrelevant at best.

Prorogation hit a nerve because it touched upon the greater issue of Parliament, and of democracy, and how the two play out in Canada. Even if you supported the Prime Minister's decision—which I can respect—you owe it to the nearly quarter of a million Canadians to at least acknowledge their concerns. If Parliament does not take its role seriously, then people have every right to become cynical.

We need an opposition focused on the issues, not chasing scandal for the sake of political goal-scoring. We need a government that answers questions directly instead of deflecting or shifting the blame.

All of that being said, I do have reason for hope. The very fact that I sit here before you today is proof that the government is taking this issue seriously. A recent motion brought forward by the member for Wellington—Halton Hills addresses the issue of decorum in the House and hopefully will lead to new conventions on respect in and for the chamber.

Last week's decision from the Speaker called upon all parties to work together, presenting an opportunity to renew your commitment to serving the best interests of Canadians. Prorogation has kicked off what will hopefully translate into greater citizen engagement with the democratic process. You can help to foster this by working together on a solution to protect and strengthen the role of Parliament in the decisions that guide and shape our nation.

Thank you.

● (1110)

The Chair: Great, thank you. Thank you so much.

Madam Jennings, you're up first today.

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt. I think we'll go seven minutes on the first one, and then we can see what we can put in at the end.

Thank you.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Certainly.

Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. White, for your presentation. And thank you for the work that you did in having the idea to set up the Facebook group, which allowed politicians to understand there were a significant number of Canadians who were concerned about the issue of prorogation.

I appreciated your comment when you stated that even those who support the Prime Minister's decision to request prorogation by the Governor General last December should still take seriously the concerns that have been expressed by not just Canadians who signed up to the CAPP Facebook. And you've talked about how it should be the House of Commons or Parliament that decides when and how it sits. I'm assuming that you're talking about to the exclusion of dissolution of Parliament for an election.

Have you followed the testimonies that we've heard previous to yourself?

Mr. Christopher White: I followed a few of them. I remember I caught Professor Mendes last weekend. I believe I also heard the House law clerk, a portion of his as well, yes.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: What we've been presented with—and I'll try to accurately summarize—is we've had some witnesses who have talked about the fact that, yes, Parliament can in fact create parameters for the Prime Minister to exercise his authority to request prorogation of the Governor General. Everyone appears to agree that we cannot affect the Governor General's authority and reserve powers to award prorogation, if I can call it that, or to prorogue the House. Some witnesses have talked about legislation, other witnesses have talked about the Standing Orders and legislation, and other witnesses have put forth the possibility of Standing Orders solely.

In all cases, though, they've talked about how it would be very important, if Parliament does agree to go forth and create parameters, that we be very careful to ensure that it is not so restrictive as to exclude exceptional circumstances where any reasonable person, any reasonable politician, regardless of their political stripe, would agree that there should be prorogation if there is just cause to request it. And secondly, Parliament or the House may wish to look at describing incentives for the Prime Minister to follow or not, but should he not follow them, there would be possible consequences once a new session began.

I'd like to know if you have any thoughts on that.

● (1115)

Mr. Christopher White: Again, I've heard the discussion, it's the Standing Orders, legislation, or both. I think the whole point of it is to try to establish a convention. And as I said in my presentation, you can't simply create a convention and expect it to be a convention. Conventions are created through routine use, that sort of thing. I see introducing Standing Orders like that more as a symbolic demonstration of what Canadians expect from the government. And certainly, yes, I understand there may be points where prorogation may need to be called, and so to not keep the rules too rigid or anything like that.

I haven't put too much thought into the idea of incentives. I remember hearing them talked about. There were disincentives as well, and I know that there was some critique as to that, and I agree. What needs to happen is just this establishment of new conventions, and part of that is this process that's going on in this room right now, the discussion of it, is taking the issue seriously. So even if nothing ends up changing, if there's no legislation introduced or the Standing Orders aren't changed, or anything like that, the last few months have shown that any prime minister who might give the appearance of misusing the power of prorogation will do so at their own risk.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: The other point that I'd like to raise with you is the issue of CAPP itself, because the Facebook group was actually created for Canadians who wished to express their views on the decision of the Prime Minister to request prorogation, and the circumstances that surrounded that, the context. What is CAPP doing now that the House has resumed and normal business of the House is continuing? What, if anything, is CAPP doing?

Mr. Christopher White: The thing with the Facebook groups is that once they hit 5,000 members, you actually can't change things around a bit. I was very interested in actually changing the name of the group to reflect the broader mandate.

What was really interesting about the group is that it really did kick off a lot of other discussion and questions about the role of Parliament and government, questions such as the role of the monarchy in Canada, proportional representation, other forms of voting, and that sort of thing. So I was really hoping to change the name of the group to reflect that. Unfortunately, it remains Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament.

I think there are about 217,000 members still. Of those, though, I would say there are probably only a few dozen who remain active, and the issues that are discussed today tend to be things that have come up during that week. For instance, there was a discussion as to the Afghan detainee documents for quite a while, and recent issues such as Mr. Ignatieff's call for the Governor General's term to be extended. Any issue of the day gets brought up and discussed and then eventually fades away. So it remains active. People remain interested in prorogation to see what happens with it.

I've told people on the boards that I'm going to be here and many of them are excited. It's really encouraging to see that, to see that their efforts and their concerns are being addressed. So I thank all the members here today for taking that quite seriously.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Do you know if any significant number of the people who signed up to CAPP, beyond CAPP itself, have become active in their own communities on issues that one might deem to be political?

Mr. Christopher White: Absolutely, and I'm sure I'll get some questions as to the legitimacy of CAPP, but what's really interesting is that because of the rallies, these chapters basically sprung up in different communities, and I'm happy to say that many of them do remain quite active.

I know in Toronto they have regular democracy cafés. A couple of weeks ago they had Professor Russell address them. I know in Vancouver they've actually helped to sponsor the tour that Andrew Coyne is currently embarking on, so that's quite exciting.

Again, the fact that they are hearing from a variety of voices on many different topics and issues I think is what's really going to be the lasting effect in this, the fact that it has been the gateway for a lot of people to get involved politically. So it's been quite encouraging.

The Chair: There are eight seconds left. You timed it just perfect today.

Mr. Reid, you're up next.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): First of all, welcome. We're very glad to have you here.

This is not really relevant to our proceedings, but you look exactly like a friend of mine called Brad Conlin.

● (1120)

Mr. Christopher White: I get that a lot, actually. I look like Brad, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'll pass that on to him.

I wanted to ask some questions about the development of CAPP. The first thing that strikes me when I read about the very large number of people who joined CAPP is I look at that and I think this happened starting in January this year. I think it was January 3 or something like that.

Mr. Christopher White: It was actually December 30, the day—

Mr. Scott Reid: The very same day, okay.

Mr. Christopher White: Yes, it was the same day it happened. I believe by January 3 our numbers were at 11,000, on January 7 we were at 100,000, and on January 14 it was 200,000. That puts it into perspective there.

Mr. Scott Reid: The obvious thought that occurs to me is this didn't happen the year before, so there are three possible explanations I can imagine. I'm just wondering which sounds the most plausible to you.

One is that what was needed was a dynamic individual like yourself, and that person wasn't there for the prorogation that took place in 2008. The second one is that there's a difference in quality between the two prorogations. The third one is the social medium itself just changed or there were more people involved and therefore there was a greater ability to go viral in 2009 versus 2008, the end of 2007 and 2008.

I'm just wondering if one of those explains why the difference between the two years.

Mr. Christopher White: I can talk personally and that will give you some perspective on it. Again, I'm politically aware. I follow politics and read the news and everything like that. So back in 2008 I was aware when Mr. Harper had asked to prorogue in face of the coalition attempt. Honestly, at that point, in regard to all the actors in that situation, I wasn't very impressed with what was going on, so I didn't choose to get involved. That was when I was not apathetic, but very much more cynical than I am today.

That's why I personally didn't get involved then, but I do think it was actually what happened in 2008, because it was one year right after the other again. I think a lot of people grumbled about it in 2008, but they also grumbled about the idea of the coalition, so they balanced each other off, if you want to look at it that way.

In 2009, to see it happen again without that other opposite end of things, personally that's why I decided to get involved. Again, I read it, I was frustrated. It was actually Andrew Coyne who came up with the idea. I read it on his blog in *Maclean's*. I thought that would be a great idea. And for whatever reason, it grew from there.

Personally, my involvement with it and the way I've been able to articulate and not be a quack about it is because I'm not particularly partisan.

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): I'm in that group.

Mr. Scott Reid: I know you are, Marcel, but many respectable people are too. You shouldn't try to discredit it here like that.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Marcel Proulx: That's the start of the intimidation that comes down.

Mr. Scott Reid: You've read through it. Obviously, with that many people, many are posting comments. It would be hard to keep up with all the comments, but I'm assuming you have a pretty good sense of the flavour of that commentary you've received. You described the distinction you made between the 2008 and 2009 situations. Would you say that your own sense as to the distinction between those two situations is roughly comparable to what the average person who was joining up was, or was there a variety of different perspectives?

Mr. Christopher White: I think there were many people who were just as upset in 2008 as in 2009 but didn't have it as an outlet. I think there were quite a few people like that as well. We had some people who had come on and for whatever reason they had told me that.... I have gotten a lot of e-mail and correspondence over the last several months. It started dipping down in March a bit, but for a lot of people, the 2009 prorogation was the first time they started getting involved.

One gentleman said that he's been able to vote since 1984 and the first time he had walked into his MP's constituency office was over this issue. But I do think the general sentiment is.... The prorogation is emblematic of greater problems and a greater democratic deficit that people have been feeling. This goes back not simply with the current government, but previous governments. I think it's been building and building over the years.

As for the timing, a lot of it was just plain luck, I think. There wasn't a lot of news going on. The fact that it got news coverage got more people interested.

Mr. Scott Reid: That thought occurred to me as well. I don't know if it matters once you get a bit of momentum, but there's that critical moment at the very beginning of something when it's easy to get squashed by a story about—

● (1125)

Mr. Christopher White: Balloon boy.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. A philandering golf star or something like that. Balloon boy, yes. You were obviously listening to the same CBC broadcast I was on the way over here.

One of the things about social media is the fact that they allow people who are geographically spread out to link together in a way that just isn't possible when you have to overcome the normal geographic barriers. It also makes it hard to tell where people come from, but you must have some indication just from what people said. In your opinion, was this more or less evenly spread across the country, across demographic groups? I'm thinking of all those different things that often divide us. What's your sense?

Mr. Christopher White: It was quite interesting. There were a couple of surveys done. One graduate student in Lethbridge is currently doing her master's thesis on the Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament Facebook group. She circulated a survey. There was another one. I can't remember the organization that had done it, but I think they had around 350 participants. It was self-selecting, of course, but they found that about 40% of the respondents were over the age of 35, which is quite interesting, because there is this perspective that Facebook is just for teenagers and that sort of thing.

We had chapters in every province and territory, with the exception of Nunavut. In Alberta, we had chapters in Grand Prairie for the Peace River region, Edmonton, Calgary, and Lethbridge. I had people e-mailing in who weren't close to any major centres. So I think it represented a very diverse, very dynamic cross-section that really did represent the sentiments that Canadians were feeling at the time. For instance, we had people who were apolitical and got involved with this. We had people who voted for a variety of different political parties. We had people who have been and remain staunch Conservatives, but they were upset by this as well. So it's quite interesting.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid.

Madame Gagnon, welcome to our committee today.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Thank you.

Mr. White, your approach is interesting. Actually, the House was prorogued during the Christmas holidays. That caused people to be more cynical towards politicians. The government used prorogation in an abusive way to avoid accountability on some issues, and everyone was hurt. I remember people telling us that we were going to be on holidays and that it did not matter whether we were sitting or not because parliamentarians do not do a heck of a lot. I am not sure if you received e-mails like that.

So the power the prime minister has to prorogue Parliament is a huge responsibility. We cannot use it to avoid facing the opposition and being accountable to the people. Do you think your efforts will help to increase the understanding of the role of parliamentarians and of the parliamentary system? In fact, the opposition has a say in accountability. Often, the government makes the decisions on priority issues, but the opposition also has to play the role of watchdog on behalf of the people. Have you seen that kind of thinking among the public? It is important. It is said sometimes that the opposition cannot do anything and that it only criticizes and complains. That is a very superficial way of looking at the role of the opposition. I look forward to the people waking up and saying that the opposition is also important and that it has its place in a parliament.

Mr. Christopher White: May I answer in English? I really have no hope of sitting on the Supreme Court.

Some hon. members: Ha, Ha!

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher White: I'd actually been working on that joke.

I think what's really interesting about what's happened is that a lot of people are starting to really think and reflect—I'm speaking personally, as well, here—about the different actors in Parliament. Again, it's correct, the opposition is not simply there; they're as critical to the proper functioning of the Government of Canada as the governing party.

I think what's interesting is that a lot of people have actually started taking more interest in procedure and that sort of thing and actually started thinking more. It's quite interesting to see. The main idea we have of Parliament is question period, the yelling and the heckling, and all of that. But then to see a fairly collegial atmosphere among different actors or different parties is quite refreshing.

I think people are taking more notice of that and paying more attention to what goes on in committees. Again, there was the question as to whether prorogation was requested in order to prevent the Afghan committee from asking questions. So people started thinking about what committees do and what their role is. It has been quite encouraging that there has been a lot more discussion, and people are considering that. Even on the CAPP forum, I have people asking questions, and then they'll go to the Parliament website and take out the little bits of information, post it and discuss it. It's been really encouraging to people.

It's not until you have your voice taken away that you really realize how important it is to be able to have that. I think that what's happened here has actually been quite good in some ways. It's gotten a lot of people to wake up and start paying a lot more attention.

● (1130)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Were people aware that it was the third time the government had used prorogation since it was elected four years ago, in order to silence the opposition or to avoid accountability on some issues?

The reasons were almost the same the three times Parliament was prorogued. If we look at what the previous governments did, we see that there were four prorogations in 10 years. So we can say that this use is abusive.

If there is prorogation when parliamentarians are on holidays, for example during the Christmas holidays or summer break, would you look favourably on parliamentarians being called back to the House to debate explaining to the people what is really happening in order to stop this kind of cynicism? We are told we are on holidays, we should be happy, we are in our riding and we do nothing. Often, the people do not know what the members do; they are not aware of all the work that goes on in the riding offices, unless they need to see a member for such and such a matter. What do you think about that? When we heard about prorogation, we were a little insulted about not being able to come back to Parliament. The prime minister decided to prorogue Parliament, and we had no say in it. We also have no voice.

Have you perhaps thought about a formula where parliamentarians could come back to the House when there is a need for debate? The House could be prorogued, but there could still be the need for a debate.

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher White: This is going beyond my expertise as to knowing actual procedure and that sort of thing, but I do know in regard to prorogation that once the time has been set it can actually be recalled earlier, but again that power resides with the Governor General. So that's this idea of talking about changing the Standing Orders, or introducing legislation to perhaps put in some sort of mechanism, some way to either recall earlier or something. But again, for me the main thing is to at least put the question before the House, maybe not even necessarily require the House to vote on it.

I know one of Professor Mendes' recommendations was to at least have the issue debated to understand what parliamentarians feel about it, because part of how government works is to be able to have the question brought forward and have it debated, and people to go back and forth on it, and for Canadians to be able to hear that, and understand what the different perspectives are and make their opinions based on that. I'm very much in favour of some mechanism to bring the House, the entire voice of Parliament, to the table when discussing when it should be prorogued.

The Chair: Thank you.

Right on time. Are you guys working out with your own clocks down there? To me, that's fantastic.

Mr. Christopherson, you're up.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you very much, Chair.

Christopher, it's good to see you again. Thank you for coming.

It occurred to me while you were talking, if our ages were reversed, I could be Christopher's son. That will give him something to groan about.

Let me just say to you that you're very impressive. It's not easy to come in here in front of a group of parliamentarians, particularly given some of the antics we do get into. I think it's fair to say that, particularly to a lot of younger Canadians, you're a folk hero, and I hope you wear that appropriately, because you now are part of the community of leaders who people look to in terms of the direction in which we ought to be going as a country. I appreciate what you've done so far, and wish you well going forward, and hope you stay involved somewhere in public life. I think there's a role for you, it's pretty apparent.

One of the things that was interesting—picking up on where Mr. Reid was going in terms of the phenomenon of social networking—was the question of whether there would be a transference of activism from sitting in one's home any time, night or day, regardless of the weather, and just clicking and suddenly you're an activist, versus the call for January 23 in the middle of winter to actually come outside and put yourself out in the elements to make your point. And lo and behold, they appeared.

I was in Gore Park in downtown Hamilton on January 23, and it was packed. It was speakers in the back of the pickup truck, it was about as grassroots politics as you're ever going to see. There was just a natural outrage that people felt, as you well put it, that something had been taken away from them, that they had something and it was taken away.

You've been following the advice, and you're obviously very learned in your own right, and you'll see that there's some question of whether we could do anything, short of a constitutional amendment, that would actually stop it. You mentioned we have a legislative route, we have our Standing Orders, and a constitutional amendment would put a stop to it. We'll probably wrestle with disincentives and different things, but in large part—and that's the point you made—if we do it through the Standing Orders and legislation, it's going to be the political price that a Prime Minister of the day would pay, as opposed to the actual penalties, because they can factor those in. What they can't factor in is where the public is going to be.

So my question to you is, do you think that's enough? Do you think there have been enough civics lessons, that people get it enough that if the Prime Minister were to ignore either legislation or the Standing Orders, which don't have the same anchor as a constitutional amendment, people would react to that and say that the Prime Minister is not following the rules and would get it that this is wrong, or are we putting in place a paper tiger here?

● (1135)

Mr. Christopher White: Realistically, nothing short of a constitutional amendment will have any weight to it. But part of the reason I started the group in the first place was to put a stop to it, not having this become routine. Because it happened twice in two years, it was very dangerous.

If this becomes the new attitude—and I'm thinking beyond the current government—some day we will have the Liberals in government again, and for them to take what has happened before and keep going with it.... That's the general excuse we see in government, that the last guys did the same thing, or they did worse.

So they would say the buck stops here; let's try to get back to something that makes a bit more sense and understand what the spirit of Parliament is in a democracy. I think that as long as the public has the interest and the capacity to be involved.... And that's the great thing about social media and social networking: it empowers Canadians in a way that probably wouldn't have been possible 15 or 20 years ago.

You see it in other cases too. There was opposition to the sale of NB Power. They had very large demonstrations in New Brunswick about it. They had a very large Facebook component as well. I know in Ontario there was an issue about young drivers and again a lot of organizations went online. So I think this is a new era. And I would stress again that even if there is no new legislation or a Standing Orders change, part of what's going on today is establishing this convention. There is a recognition that prorogation is the issue, that it's absolutely necessary, but there are times when it should or should not be used.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks.

To follow up on your comments about engagement, one of the things that was disconcerting about a year ago.... The politics of it is one thing, and that's fine, that's what we do. What was upsetting, though, was how easy it was for the government to tell Canadians there was something unconstitutional, there was some kind of coup going on, and that coalitions were somehow illegitimate. I'm wondering, given that we don't know the outcome of the next election, we don't know where we're going to be, we may end up revisiting these kinds of things.

This is speaking to the people understanding a civics lesson. Do you think there's enough knowledge out there that they're not going to pull off that scare, and if there's going to be a debate is it going to be about the politics of the matter, as opposed to a civics lesson? Because a lot of Canadians still believe that when we have an election they elect the Prime Minister and they elect the government, and that's not the case. We elect members of Parliament. Parliament chooses who the government's going to be.

Mr. Scott Reid: On a point of order, Mr. Christopherson only—

The Chair: Yes, I was just getting to it, Mr. Reid. Thank you very much.

I know you're having fun with each other over who the next coalition will be, but let's talk about the one that might have been rather than the one that might come.

Mr. Christopherson.

● (1140)

Mr. David Christopherson: Do you think the government can do that again, pull the wool over—

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Point of order.

The Chair: We're finishing that point of order. Sorry.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I just want to make sure you're talking about the informal coalition that took place between the NDP and the Conservative Party back in the fall of 2005 to bring down a minority Liberal government?

The Chair: No, Ms. Jennings, you are.

We'll carry on with Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, this really impresses our young visitors.

I could try again to ask a simple question.

Do you believe the Canadian people are educated enough that if we get into that kind of scenario again, the notion that somehow there's something illegitimate going on will be known by Canadians as not illegitimate and that the issue is a political debate, not whether or not some coup has taken place?

Mr. Christopher White: I don't know. I certainly am disappointed as to what happened last year over the coalition, the fact that it is brought up occasionally when you read Hansard, and you see “unholy alliance” mentioned a few times. But you see scare tactics from all sides, especially around elections, so it's inevitable that whoever's in power or whoever's in opposition will try to scare Canadians into voting for them.

It would be great if we could have politicians motivate people by hope alone, yet fear is a much more primal emotion and it gets to people a lot more easily than promoting good ideas. But it is quite interesting that there is confusion in Canada as to whether we elect governments or the Prime Minister, which we don't. We elect a legislative assembly of representatives, who among them choose the Prime Minister.

The last time I was in town I was speaking with Elizabeth May, and she had people asking her if we could impeach the Prime Minister, if that's not how our system works. There does seem to be a lot of confusion with the American system of government. Very likely that's because people spend a lot more time.... It's a much bigger country. Everybody knows who Barack Obama's wife is, but no one knows who Stephen Harper is married to. I think that's very interesting, very telling. I'm not saying we need to, but it just shows the level of interest.

Am I done?

The Chair: I was letting you finish your thought.

Mr. Christopher White: Okay. I'm sorry I didn't quite have time. There was too much to get to, and maybe I'll get there.

The Chair: We are going to get probably a little small round in.

Laureen Harper, by the way, is a very nice person.

Mr. Christopher White: Yes, I know.

The Chair: Madam Jennings, let's try two minutes, because it looks like that's about right, if we had a round of about two minutes going around.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Thank you.

I want to continue on a point from my colleague David Christopherson. Very briefly, it was the issue of people having claimed that the coalition government agreement between the Liberal Party of Canada and the New Democratic Party of Canada was unholy, was illegal, was unconstitutional, etc., and that many Canadians, not knowing what our constitutional parliamentary democracy is and how it actually operates, actually bought into that.

We have elections that are taking place in another parliamentary democracy today, in the U.K., and for weeks now there have been discussions that have been seen as perfectly legitimate that the Liberal Democrats might form a coalition with the Labour Party or with the Conservative Party, and there has been absolutely no discussion that such discussions or even the possibility of it materializing is unholy, unconstitutional.

So I would like to know if CAPP has in any way used that over the past couple of weeks, and maybe going into the future, to bring that kind of education to both its members and anyone else who may go on the site to look at it and then visit it.

Mr. Christopher White: Again, I honestly have not been too active on the CAPP forum lately, and certainly the idea is to just to keep people discussing. We don't want to be putting out the idea of a coalition with the intent of hopefully propping up any parties or anything like that.

But I think it is quite interesting that we have sort of this confusion and that some people would perhaps try to exploit that. I think what's going on in Britain right now is quite interesting and the fact that they are seriously considering it. We copied and pasted their system of government, right, so if they can make it work, then there's the possibility that we can as well.

Again, I would hate to see any government try to confuse Canadians as to the legitimacy of different ways of governing. I mean, all political parties by their nature are coalitions of some sort, played out very obviously with the merger of the two Conservative parties. In the nineties there was kind of a split going on in the NDP, and there are always the different factions within the Liberal Party as well. So parties themselves are coalitions.

Parliament itself in order to pass anything requires some form of consensus. I am certainly not alone in thinking that we are all kind of headed down this road of continual minority governments. So coalitions, whether they are formal or informal—we have seen the NDP support the current government, we have seen the Liberal support in some ways by abstaining and what not—are going to continue, and we need to really understand and educate Canadians about that.

● (1145)

The Chair: Excellent.

Mr. Lukiwski, two minutes, and yes, we went a little long there. Go ahead.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Thanks very much.

Thanks very much, Mr. White, for coming here.

I also want to tell you that I liked your line that you were practising, that you're not applying for the Supreme Court. I might with your permission use that from time to time.

To follow up with some of the general conversation that is going on, I'll just comment, I guess, first on the coalition. The difference, I believe, between the discussion that's happening right now in the U. K. election and the last time coalition was discussed here in Canada following the 2008 election was exactly that, that the coalition came to light following the election as opposed to it being discussed in the lead-up to the campaign. I think that's maybe why there's a different attitude in the U.K., because people are anticipating what might happen. If they have objections to it they can voice them prior to the election as opposed to having something perhaps sprung on them afterwards.

I guess that leads me into the question I really wanted to ask. How much of an educational mode did your group have? In other words, I got from your comments and your presentation that many, if not most, of the people who joined your Facebook group really didn't consider themselves to be politically active prior to joining.

So I would think that the learning curve must have been reasonably steep if you got into discussions like constitutional amendments. I'm just wondering how much of a role did you or did other members of your group actually play in educating or informing those members who were not previously politically active or knowledgeable about what might be entailed to curtail or to stop or control prorogation.

The Chair: Give a 30-second answer, if you can, please.

Mr. Christopher White: It's quite interesting. I was the moderator. I would try to keep the discussion civil and that sort of thing, but in terms of actually educating.... It was basically that anybody who had a question could bring it forward, and people would give answers. Sometimes they were wrong answers. Sometimes people were misinformed, for different reasons, whether intentionally or not. It was that sort of thing, but what was interesting about it was that it was quite organic, that there wasn't really some sort of central force guiding the discussion.

I can't really say how the information came, other than that. It just came up, and people became informed that way.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Were you happy with the level of education? You said some of them might have been ill-informed, but do you think at the end of the day that mainly people were well informed?

Mr. Marcel Proulx: I think the chair wants your attention.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Lukiwski. That was a very good attempt to get another question in, and perhaps we'll get a bit of an answer to it during Mr. Ménard's time.

Monsieur Ménard, we're very happy to have you here today. You have two minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, BQ): Thank you.

How old are you, Mr. White?

Mr. Christopher White: I am 25.

Mr. Serge Ménard: Are you studying political science?

Mr. Christopher White: No, I am in anthropology.

Mr. Serge Ménard: Before that, were you particularly interested in politics?

Mr. Christopher White: Yes, but...

[*English*]

I'll go in English. It's just easier for me; I won't start stammering.

I was someone who followed politics. I was very interested in reading about it, but I had never been particularly engaged. I was a bit more interested in my undergraduate time, but I became disenchanted for various reasons. That was more at the provincial and campus levels, that sort of thing. This was my first time really getting involved politically.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Your rapid success in politics reminds of Corneille's words: “Our trial strokes are masterstrokes, you see.” Corneille was a great tragedian.

● (1150)

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher White: I'm sorry; I don't—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: It is a famous line from Corneille. The fact that they are Alexandrine lines gives it a certain rhythm. “Our trial strokes are masterstrokes, you see.” Then the tragedy ends. He is going to kill someone.

Do you intend to go into politics now?

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher White: Certainly, the fact that I'm here today—I was invited, I wasn't subpoenaed or anything like that—means I'm very much interested in remaining involved in some capacity. I'm still trying to decide where I would fit into things, whether I would want to get involved in a formal political party, whether I would like to remain where I am right now in this sort of way. But I would certainly like to build on what has happened personally.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: Have you figured out approximately how many francophones joined your movement?

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher White: That's something that's really interesting. As I said, there are only a few dozen or so members who are still active. As for....

Are you talking about Québécois or francophones from across the country as well?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard: If you can make the distinction, go ahead, but I am mostly interested in knowing whether there are francophones.

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher White: It was interesting. We had less interest in Quebec, compared with the rest of the country, and again, because it was English...there was some discussion that went on in French as well, but I can't give any numbers on it, or even a rough idea.

The Chair: Merci.

Mr. Christopherson, you may have a quick question. We have a couple of other members who would like some one-offs, and we'll try those if we have time. Our next witness has not poked his head in yet, so we're okay.

Go ahead.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

I have just one question, again looking at you as one representative of the younger generation, about to start taking your leadership role.

The role of the official opposition and by extension of the other opposition parties is to oppose: the loyal opposition—loyal to the crown, loyal to the country, but holding the government to account. That's their job, to give the government a hard time, hold them to account. By the same token, there's a yearning across the country for us politicians to work together for the betterment of Canada. What are your thoughts on where you would draw the line between those two conflicting demands? On the one hand, our role is to oppose and hold the government to account, ask difficult questions, give them a hard time. On the other hand, there's the desire for all of us to put that aside and work together, whereby you could be accused of not doing your job as the opposition.

What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Christopher White: There's something about human nature whereby we tend to divide things into very hard and fast dichotomies, whereas I prefer to look at things more as duality: these things are not actually opposing but are complementary. Part of answering to Canadians and working together and moving forward on things is asking questions and thinking critically about policy and about legislation and how it's going to affect things.

This comes within parties themselves as well. I'm sure a lot of stuff goes on behind closed doors, as you're coming up with ideas and putting them forward; there is discussion as to the pros and cons and weighing those two things. I don't see them as being opposite.

Simply re-establishing decorum in something like question period, which is probably the most visible way Canadians see everyone here at work, not chasing after scandal.... We want to see the opposition asking important questions about relevant things, not chasing scandals or asking questions about hockey teams or that sort of thing, and to see the government able to answer, and not deflect or bring up Adscam, the Pacific scandal, or anything like that.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll hear Mr. Hoback really quickly, and I know Monsieur Proulx would like a question. We'll try to do some one-offs here and we'll just keep trying.

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): I'll be really quick, Mr. Chair.

Of course, in prorogation the role of Parliament in a minority government situation is different from its role in a majority government case. One might argue that in a minority government you would actually have more power to control prorogation.

Were the members of your Facebook group upset that the minority government—the opposition, at this point—didn't take that control? They could have brought in a confidence motion. That would have been the ultimate decision-maker on whether this was legitimate or not.

Mr. Christopher White: I'm not too sure about.... I understand, for instance, that in 2008 there was a confidence motion brought forward, and that's how it was prorogued. I'm not too sure how the opposition could have responded. It's a bit beyond my understanding and expertise.

Mr. Randy Hoback: In a majority government, obviously the opposition doesn't have enough members to bring the government down, and it is what it is. But in a minority government they do have enough members to bring the government down, so that if they were totally upset and reading the will of the people, as they believed, wouldn't that have been the appropriate action?

Mr. Christopher White: No, not necessarily; I don't think that any time the opposition or Canadians are opposed to something the government has done we would need to rush into an election or anything like that. Government is not about fighting and winning elections. It's about, as we have discussed, moving Canada forward—discussing and debating and that sort of thing as well.

Mr. Randy Hoback: But in the same breath, you're in favour of bringing in rules and regulations or something around this. Yet I say that the big rule, the big regulation is there, and that's confidence.

● (1155)

Mr. Christopher White: That seems to me to be an all-or-nothing argument. We have many conventions that guide what happens in Parliament. We don't decide it's either one way or the highway. I think that's the attitude we want to get away from, that it has to be one or the other. We need to be able to have room for discussion and debate to reconsider things and to re-establish certain conventions.

I like the idea that there would be conventions, because it would allow for flexibility when Parliament needs to be prorogued.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hoback.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Proulx.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. White, I would first like to congratulate you. It is a good initiative. I would also like to thank you for coming to meet with us today.

I joined your group on the Web, but is there not also a site translated into French by a Montreal group to attract francophones?

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher White: Yes, there was. There are little things about Facebook that have funnelled how we went. We originally wanted the title to be in English and French, but there's a limit on how long you can make titles, which is unfortunate. We had a second group created. They basically copied and pasted. I don't recall what happened with it; I know that the majority of members remained on the main group. There were also people who were active... I believe there were Quebec and Montreal chapters created. I know for sure there was a Montreal one, and people were probably more active and involved there. Certainly for some time I encouraged people to communicate in French and I did a couple of posts in French every once in a while, that sort of thing.

It would have been great to have it, to find some way to bring in more members and make it more bilingual, but it's the nature of Facebook.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Thank you. If you have any other good ideas like that for sites, you can count on my joining.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Proulx already mentioned that he would buy any T-shirts you're putting out or anything like that.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Of course I would, as long as they're not more than a thousand—dollars.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Yes.

We're going to stop there.

Mr. White, thank you so much for coming today. The fact that you're an anthropology student means you could probably suggest to us why we behave the way we do.

You mentioned a couple of other things that I think both bear repeating. You asked a question: "Can a Facebook debate actually become a convention?" Perhaps in the future this is the technology we're heading to, and maybe we will have to be researching that at this committee.

I really want to thank you, because you said that people have become aware of procedures and that it's becoming a bigger thing in the world out there. We think that's because of this committee and the great work that it does. So we thank you for bringing that to Canada's attention.

We'll watch your site, if you'll watch our committee, and we'll see where we end up with this.

Mr. Christopher White: Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you very much for coming.

We'll suspend just for a moment while we change witnesses. Thank you.

● _____ (Pause) _____ ●

● (1200)

The Chair: I'll call the meeting back to order. Professor Weinstock is here with us now.

I thank the group for your cooperation on the timing in the first hour. As I mentioned then, this room will be occupied at one o'clock by another committee, so we need to finish just a little bit before one. I thank you all for your short questions and answers. It works very well for us.

Professor, perhaps you'd like to give us an opening statement and tell us a little about yourself as well as what your thoughts are on the issue we are studying here today. Then we'll rotate through the parties and ask you some questions in that period of time.

Thank you for coming, and let's go ahead and do that. And please, don't mind that some of the members, including me, may be consuming food while you're talking. We're not trying to be rude, but we work straight through our lunch hour these days.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock (Professor of Philosophy, Université de Montréal): I understand.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: And I appreciate that eating will perhaps make you less ferocious with me during the question period.

The Chair: That's what we're hoping.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: Thank you very much for having me here. It's a pleasure and an honour, and at the same time a bit of a sacrifice, since being here means that I'll have to spend the fifth game of the Canadiens-Pittsburgh semifinal in Ottawa rather than in Montreal. But I'm sure that some of you will direct me to the appropriate sports bar to be surrounded by Canadiens fans rather than Senators fans.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: You should listen to it in French on my side of the river.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: Oh, maybe I should. I'll talk to you after.

I imagine the reason I'm here is that in January I wrote a letter that snowballed beyond what I'd expected. It ended up being signed by close to 300 academics, for the most part professors of law, political science, and some of us oddball philosophers.

It made a couple of points, which I think over the course of the last four or five months have become part of the public debate. Indeed, I think one of the gratifying things about the letter is that probably a lot of what I'll say in going over, very briefly, what's in the letter will be boringly redundant to you now. I think perhaps it wasn't so much in January when we wrote the letter.

I wouldn't want to insult you by going into too much detail about it, but the point we wanted to make to Canadians is that we have a very peculiar parliamentary system. I guess they're all peculiar, but the particular peculiarities of ours means that the way in which different powers are held in check as opposed to the American system does not depend so much on painstaking rules being spelled out, black on white, but rather on conventions, some of which go back hundreds of years in the British parliamentary tradition, and also on the very important notion of trust.

Particularly important powers are vested in the office of the Prime Minister, much greater power is vested there than in the power of the presidency in the United States. As we saw in the last few months during the health care debate, you can be a popular president with majorities in both Houses and yet not be able to get anything done.

Relatively speaking, a lot more power is vested in the office of the Prime Minister, even in the context of a minority government, such as the ones that we have had over the course of the last few years. The notion of trust is therefore extremely important in that those powers are understood to be abusable. They aren't checked by rules that can be pointed to, black on white. They can be abused, and the trust of Parliament and the trust of the Canadian people through their representatives are based on the understanding that they will not be abused.

When one thinks about it, prorogation is quite a considerable power, though nobody knew the word before about a year and a half ago or they confused it with Polish meat-filled delicacies.

As opposed to adjournment, as opposed to calling it a recess, it really is the ability to hit the reset button, as it were, start things from scratch. It is understood that in the life of a government that will be necessary. One can come to the end of the natural life of a legislative agenda, even if all the bills haven't been gone through. One feels sometimes that a government does need to hit the reset button.

Where trust connects with this issue is that there has to be an appreciation on the part of both the population at large, whose trust in this institution is extremely important, and on the part of parliamentarians that when the reset button is hit, it is done because something of that order has occurred, and there is an understanding on both sides of the floor that there is no useful purpose left in pursuing the legislative agenda that was announced in the previous throne speech.

I think that in the last few years we have seen a worrying abuse of that power, a slide toward the use of that power for more partisan, tactical purposes.

In retrospect, 20/20 hindsight, this might have been something that we could have come to expect. We have come into a period of minority governments, first a Liberal minority government and now a Conservative minority government, which will last for how long? It is natural to expect the office of the prime minister and the governing party to reach for the tools that are at their disposal to offset the relative lack of power or lesser power that the fact of being a minority government entails as opposed to being a majority government.

One can't really imagine a situation, other than rebellion within the ranks of the governing party, that would lead to a prime minister using the power to prorogue in the way that has been done.

I'm not a political scientist, but my armchair understanding of the political forces at play suggests that we are entering a period of successive minority governments in the medium term. We really have to think long and hard about something that we didn't have to think long and hard about in a period of our history when majority governments were the norm.

● (1205)

I think that although harsh words were spoken when the prorogations occurred last year and the year before, in retrospect one can realize that for a government trying to stay afloat, for a government involved in the cut and thrust of parliamentary affairs, it is a natural thing to just reach for whatever tools are there in order to offset the sort of relative powerlessness or lesser power that minority status affords. But given the importance of this important power's being perceived by parliamentarians and by Canadians at large as being used for the common good rather than for tactical purposes, we felt that it was necessary to call the attention of Canadians—and we weren't the only ones to do so—to the fact that something perhaps quite technical and fiddly was going on that had much larger ramifications in the potential it had to offset the very subtle, unspoken, unwritten balances and checks on powers that are written into the fibre of our institutions, as opposed to spelled out in clear rules.

I went through—and I'll stop with this—the briefing paper that was prepared for this committee and found out that the prorogation power is said to be the...is it the ugly duckling, or the silent partner...? There's very little written about it. We have to rely on conventions, we have to rely on traditions, we have to rely on our sense of the ways in which this power can and cannot be used to serve the common good.

Perhaps I'll speak one last sentence, if you'll allow it. In the intervening months an interesting spate of proposals has come out, both from academia and from the opposition parties—the NDP and the Liberals—about rules that might be put in place to address this problem.

I'll just sound a skeptical note about this type of approach. While it's something that is quite natural as a reaction, one that I thought of after the prorogation—what rules can we put in place just to make this harder?—I was led to the following thought, which I presented when I was invited by the Liberal Party to one of their meetings held during the prorogation period: essentially, that any system of rules can be gamed. Any system of rules can fall foul to the cut and thrust of partisan politics. I have yet to encounter a set of rules that can't be gamed. When I presented this a couple of months ago, I used a hockey analogy invoking Sean Avery. I won't do that now, although I could, if I were asked in questions.

So I think that at the same time as we think about what rules can be put in place, we have to be quite lucid about the fact that rules and procedures probably won't be enough and that what is needed is something like a new political culture of minority governance that, in a way, infuses the ethos of parliamentarians just as much as it does the rules.

When I look at the proposals that have been put forward, a lot of them are extremely plausible at first glance. But to the extent that they involve throwing the ball back into Parliament, the play of partisan forces can just end up taking over there as well. So here is a bit of a skeptical note about some of the roads we might think about travelling. We may need a new set of rules, but we can't ignore the much more difficult task of thinking about how we can create a new culture of governance, a new ethos of governance, for the minority situations that seem to be with us for the foreseeable future.

I'll stop with that, and thank you very much.

● (1210)

The Chair: Thank you so much for your opening statement.

We'll go to questions. I think we'll start with a seven-minute round. Let's see if we can do that.

Madam Jennings, you're up.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Thank you.

Thank you, Professor Weinstock, for being here today, for having agreed to appear as a witness.

I know the analogy that you used involving Sean Avery.

Have you had an opportunity to follow the previous witnesses?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: I have not, no. I only just found out that this can all be followed online, and I will.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Okay.

I'd like to ask you a few questions.

Professor Peter Russell appeared earlier before this committee, and he had a number of points. His point 11 states:

> On March 17 of this year, the House of Commons passed a motion, moved by the Hon. Jack Layton, requiring that the Prime Minister seek the consent of the House of Commons before advising a prorogation of more than seven days.

Professor Russell goes on to say:

> This motion cannot be regarded as a constitutional convention, because it was opposed by the Prime Minister and members of the government caucus. One of the key actors involved in advising prorogation does not feel bound by the Layton motion.

But then he says:

> But that motion could be an important step towards establishing a constitutional convention, if it becomes the basis for discussing with government members in this committee or a special committee the possibility of an agreement on conditions that should apply to prime ministerial advice to prorogue.

I'd like to know, do you agree that notwithstanding the fact that a majority of members of the House of Commons adopted that motion, it does not in fact constitute a constitutional convention?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: Yes. My understanding is that it can't really be considered as a constitutional convention. Part of the reason I think so is precisely that I've spoken at great length about the issue with Peter Russell. His expertise is second to none in this country, and therefore I defer to him in matters constitutional—although I think it makes sense to view it that way.

One thing it does, and part of what establishing a new cultural of governance is going to require, is precisely motions like this, which, while they do not rise to the level of constitutional conventions, nonetheless, if you will, raise the political price on acting in certain ways. They raise the visibility, first of all, don't they? This is something that was happening under the noses of Canadians for over a century without their knowing it: prorogations, which are a normal part of parliamentary procedure. I think it is a historical step, as it were, in the direction of perhaps establishing a constitutional convention, in that it is now something that it will be much more difficult for this Prime Minister or any other prime minister to do without having to at least rhetorically address the kinds of concerns that are expressed in that motion.

● (1215)

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Thank you so much.

Professor Russell also stated that he wondered, in his point 13:

> What if the Standing Orders of the House were to be changed along the lines of the Layton motion..., but with the Conservatives still opposing the motion? Such an addition to the Standing Orders would surely be as binding on the Prime Minister as all other Standing Orders. Failure of a prime minister to observe the Standing Order could result in a ruling of contempt of Parliament and a defeat of the government on a non-confidence motion. According to constitutional convention, a Governor General would be entitled to dismiss a prime minister who refused to resign after losing a vote of non-confidence.

I think Professor Russell takes the idea of a standing order that would provide the parameters for a prime minister to advise the Governor General to use her authority to prorogue Parliament to the extreme. Others have like you suggested that it's not a bad idea to have something in the Standing Orders, but to do it in such a way that it doesn't bind and put Parliament into an even more conflictual position; to do it in such a way that, either prior to the prorogation, if there were a time limit or a number of days of prior notice—or if that was not followed, then once a new session had resumed—it would allow at that point for Parliament to express its opinion on what had taken place, without necessarily leading to a non-confidence vote.

That is not an either/or; it's not the big bludgeon weapon; it's simply that it would provide an opportunity at some point for Parliament to express its point of view. If such a standing order were adopted, the Speaker would be within his right to request a meeting with the Governor General in order to inform her of the Standing Orders once they had been adopted.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: In general, in thinking about ways in which to create over time an ethos of governance in a perhaps long-term minority situation wherein different parties will succeed one another in being in power in a minority situation, I think anything that would exacerbate the conflictual nature of Parliament would be a bad thing.

We're not used to minority government. When you look at European countries in which it's a fact of daily life, coalitions are a fact of daily life. The British, our cousins in parliamentary tradition, are going through an election right now, and the spectre of a hung Parliament and of a possible coalition—1974 all over again—is feeding a kind of terror.

I don't think that need be the case. I think there are perfectly functional European democracies that have, through different routes, arrived in a situation in which coalition-building is a necessity. But coalition-building is made a lot easier when people haven't been cast in the kind of conflictual situation that a binding standing order might exacerbate.

I think in a way it might take a longer time to create the more consensual way of dealing with the powers vested in the Prime Minister by doing it without the quick fix. I think we ought to be wary of quick fixes, of magic bullets that will solve this problem once and for all, and certainly of ones that might make the situation worse, because at the risk of repeating myself....

Something just beeped. Have I been talking too long?

The Chair: You're getting close. I don't know what the beep was, but it was really timely.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: Right.

Now I forgot what I was going to say.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: It was “not to exacerbate”.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: Yes, not to exacerbate, and.... There was a point that was probably brilliant and central to the future of Canadian parliamentary democracy that I've now forgotten.

The Chair: I'm certain it will come back to you during Mr. Reid's time.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm responsible for the beep. It's a little timer I use to keep track of my own time so that I can make sure to ask the questions in the right order.

I feel a bit like the postman who showed up and interrupted Coleridge from his writing down “Kubla Khan” and caused us to lose all those brilliant bits of verse.

● (1220)

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: I'm sure it's on the same scale.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Scott Reid: As am I. I'll have to carve this in my gravestone or something.

You made a really interesting point about political culture being at the nub of the problem here. I think you're right. I think we have a political culture that assumes majority governments; it's used to majority governments; it expects certain kinds of actions and defines decisive leadership on the basis of what a majority government would produce.

I have a couple of recent examples. I get letters every so often from constituents who say: "You guys have been the government now for several years. Why haven't you passed your legislation getting rid of the long-gun registry? You say you support that; I'm beginning to doubt your sincerity." I have to write back and say, "I am supportive, and so is the government, but the majority of Parliament isn't, and that's the way the system works."

I had something similar occur recently, when someone who was quite conversant in the political system wrote to me and said: "What's up? Why did you let that piece of legislation go through the House of Commons about making Supreme Court justices bilingual?" I had to point out that the majority in the present House of Commons wanted it and that all the Conservatives there voted against it; that it's not actually something we're supporting, but that this is what happens when you have a minority government.

This is not really something that we as politicians can make happen. It's a broader question.

What would lead us around, or is there anything that will lead us around, to having a change in our political culture and in the expectations we have of our politicians, be they opposition or government MPs?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: I think that one of the answers is probably time. I think you're perfectly right. We've had minority governments in this country now for a period of six years, which is a blip, the blink of an eye, and I think it's perfectly natural for people who have been literally raised politically in a culture of majority governments to ask, when they achieve power: "What is there at my disposal here that can permit me to act as if I had a majority?" The power to prorogue is among the various things that you can....

But I think the genius of the Canadian people, if you'll allow that expression, is such that what they seem to want in this period in our political history, and we may come out of it, is more consensual government; government that makes comprises, a government that is forced, as it were, to listen to the other side.

I was attending a lecture back at my university. Probably everybody here will be unhappy to hear this. A number cruncher from the political science department was trying to evaluate the probability of either the Liberals or the Conservatives achieving majority status, given a certain number of assumptions, which are pretty robust, about that. It's a very low probability.

People who were elected for the first time three or four years ago are a new generation of politicians; it's not as if we have to wait 30 years. There's a generation of politicians coming up that I think is going to be coming with a different set of assumptions from the ones the actors who are presently at the top of the game have been coming in with. To a certain degree, this sort of thing—just a change in the circumstances in which people work and the fact that they won't be reaching back for the assumptions that were perfectly reasonable to hold through to the beginning of this millennium—will probably have more of an impact than any set of rules that we are able to come up with. Again, any set of rules can be gamed, no matter how cleverly they are designed, if people have as their primary intention to use them to their partisan benefit and turn a minority into a majority-like situation.

In answer to your question—and I know it's not probably satisfactory for a committee like this, which likely does want to come up with a sort of silver bullet answer to the question—I think time is probably something that will work in our favour in this respect, if indeed we are at the beginning of a medium- to long-term period in which minority government will be the norm rather than the exception. But I don't think this is a bad thing, because the changes that accrue over time because of changes in circumstances and changes in the culture of this House will probably be more robust. They will probably be bred in the bone deeper than if we try to do it through rules.

My students know that I rarely give a talk without making a hockey analogy. May I?

● (1225)

The Chair: Please do.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: I have a ten-year-old son who plays hockey. He was raised in the post-lockout era of rule changes. When he sees a mild hook, of the kind that would have passed under the radar ten years ago, and a penalty isn't called, he is outraged to the point of turning blue in the face. When he gets out on the ice, the idea that he can use the stick as a way of stopping another player is something that doesn't even occur to him.

I hope the analogy is clear.

The Chair: I like it.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: For now.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: For now, but that's generational. It is being raised in a new set of circumstances, which makes the previously unimaginable imaginable, and conversely.

I think time works fast in this respect. Some politicians have been around this House for decades, and others change more quickly. As people come in who have been raised with a set of assumptions that have to do with minority government—the need to form coalitions, the need to reach across the aisle, the need to realize, as you said, that one's agenda is just one's agenda and in a minority situation you may have to compromise on a lot of things—I think that will have more of an impact than any set of rules we can come up with.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Gagnon.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Good afternoon, Mr. Weinstock. Your insight is very interesting, and I would like to understand what you did with your peers. So you wrote a letter to 300 people, that is what you said, is it not?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: It did not happen exactly like that, but I did write a letter...

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Could you tell me what your colleagues' feedback was; did you have an exchange or something? It is interesting for us since the more people address the issue we are debating, the better our decision-making process will be.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: The reaction I got was amazing on every level. At first, writing that letter was really an exercise to clarify my own thoughts. I must admit, I was shocked and outraged when a second prorogation was announced in the space of one year. I wanted to explain my reaction to myself—I am a philosopher, after all—to find out whether it was just an unjustified outburst or, on the contrary, whether there was something I could put into words, which would justify why I felt that something fundamental and not just transient had happened. I sent the letter to two or three people. It was during the holidays, a time when people do not necessarily read their e-mails right away, but there was a snowball effect that really took me by surprise. Without wanting to organize any sort of campaign myself, I gathered almost 300 signatures from professors. But beyond that, when the letter was published, I was really pleasantly surprised by the e-mail responses and the invitations I received to speak publicly not only in university settings but also in community settings.

It is certain that we did not expect the topic of prorogation to trump reasonable accommodation or more sexier topics and to mobilize the people. To my surprise, there was a real interest, a real willingness to understand the rules—that should please our chair, here. I heard people asking me repeatedly, for example, why those things were not taught in school and how could kids get out of school without understanding the basics of how our parliamentary institutions work. We should teach that to our children so that they will be more vigilant than we were.

So, up to five months after the publication of the letter, and especially in January and February, the reaction was very strong, both from the media and the so-called chattering classes, but also from the general public. I was very encouraged to see that the people were listening and they were ready to tackle really technical questions. I think they perceived danger. Sometimes, we can disagree with one government or another on policies it might bring forward, but we will not put up a fight because of that. In this case, we perceived, perhaps initially not very well expressed, that this went beyond a disagreement on policies. It was something that had to do with the fundamental way in which our institutions operate, and the reaction was very encouraging.

● (1230)

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: What you are saying is interesting. When prorogation was announced, the people in my riding said we were going to be on holidays and at the end of the day, politicians do not do any work. There is a very negative perception of the role of politicians, especially those in the opposition. The government often tells us that, in any case, we are there to get our pay and twiddle our thumbs.

There really is another perspective on the consequences of this prorogation now. I feel we have understood what was at stake. You are saying that we should perhaps think of a new system of ethics for minority governments. Personally, I have been here for 17 years and I can tell you that, since this government came to power, the perception of the parliamentary system and parliamentarians has changed. I earn my salary just like any member of the party in power, the NDP or the Liberal Party. I feel the role of parliamentarians is important, regardless of their party, because it is a voice that would not be heard otherwise. I appreciate all initiatives, whether Mr White's or yours.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: They say that every crisis is an opportunity. That is a truism, a cliché, but there is some truth in it. The public has a negative perception of politicians. Personally, I have always tried to fight against it, especially since profs are not far behind. It is often said they take four months of vacation, meaning they stop teaching at the end of April and start again in September...

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Do you teach at CEGEP?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: No, at university.

The fact that we do a host of other things when we are not in class does not necessarily show up on people's radars. We do administrative work and we make sure we follow up with students. It is the same with parliamentarians and their work. I think we need a public relations exercise for that.

I lived in England for four years when I was a student. So I have personal reasons for following the British elections, other than the fact that I am a political junkie. The current election is 100 times more interesting than those I saw when I was there. A majority government is essentially a government that comes to power and runs the country for four years. Conversely, a minority government allows the people to get more involved on human, strategic and political levels.

In England, right from the beginning of the campaign, news ratings have been phenomenal. People are fascinated. There is talk of 75 constituencies in completely out-of-the-way places in England on which the whole thing could turn. Everyone is an expert. Taxi drivers are wondering what is going to happen in such and such a riding.

The situation we are currently experiencing can be perceived as problematic—perhaps not by the Bloc Québécois—because the traditional parties want to be in power as a majority, I would imagine. I think we should exploit this opportunity to allow Parliament and Canadians to reconnect. That leaves more room for coalition and agreement between the parties. We saw it last year when there was an attempt at a coalition. In addition, that sparks a new interest in the public, simply because the whole situation is more fluid.

In my opinion, we should not let this opportunity slip away.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: What should we change in the political culture?

[*English*]

The Chair: Excuse me, but I think you're past your time by almost a minute.

I'll just take it out of Mr. Christopherson's time.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, pick on the NDP again.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, you're up.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Professor, for your interesting presentation.

I have a similar question that I asked Mr. White before you.

Short of a constitutional amendment, it looks as if we're not going to be able to put a firm blockage in in terms of thou shalt and thou shalt not. However, we have options around Standing Orders and around potential legislation. But at the end of the day, what's really going to work will be a sense among the Canadian people about what they believe is acceptable and unacceptable.

I take your point about the lack of civics lessons on the part of people coming out of our schools. Never mind prorogation, they don't even know the difference between minority and majority, and they want to talk about our president and everything else. It's incredibly frustrating. But given all that, do you think the political disincentives—because we can build in procedural disincentives—will be strong enough to achieve this? Or are we kidding ourselves, in that while this is paramount today, in five years this could all seem like ancient history? And if we flipped into a majority government and didn't have prorogation as a major issue, would we lose that? In other words, if we don't get it right in the rules, people will be saying it isn't right, that we're breaking the Standing Orders.

What I'm likening it to is the law the government passed about elections and then turned around and certainly violated the spirit of its own law, and for the most part the Canadian people weren't bothered.

● (1235)

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: For reasons that go back to the discussion I was having with Ms. Jennings, in the context of a tense and very partisan political climate right now you want to be careful about putting in mechanisms that are like “gotcha” mechanisms, mechanisms that have the potential to be one-shot sorts of....

I'm not actually sure Canadians necessarily even want that. One of the things about the system of government we have—and I think Canadians have appreciated this, in looking at the debate south of the border over first health care and now financial reform—is that we really want an executive that can actually do stuff sometimes. It's one thing to be cavalier in the use of one's mandate; it's another thing to be impotent in the ability that one can.... You know, “Elect me because I'll do this”, and then it turns out they can't do it, because there are so many sticking points.

We really do have to count on something that is much more a probabilistic kind of thing than a “gotcha” kind of mechanism, which is raising the disincentives absolutely.

You're right about the election thing. But on the other hand, I imagine that this government would think long and hard now. It did take a hit, although a temporary hit, at the polls. Although one would have thought concerning prorogation or technical rules of parliamentary procedure that Canadians wouldn't be interested in it, especially at Christmas, and although it was.... Well, I don't know; I'm not a pollster, so I don't know exactly what legs it has. I would imagine, given the fact that this lived—the media cycle around this thing was a good few weeks, or even a couple of months—that they would think long and hard before doing this again. After the letter, after Chris's Facebook initiative, there were things the government said that felt to me like trial balloons. At one point, the Prime Minister in one of his interviews tried to routinize it, and said, “You know, I might do this every year. It's no big deal, right?” I don't think that went over. You didn't hear that again in subsequent interviews.

It is a lot to expect that the Canadian population be vigilant 24/7, especially when the playoffs are on, but I think we may have also underestimated them. I think here the role of the opposition.... It's also partly our role, the role of the people who try to keep public attention on public affairs at a certain level; it's a sort of joint role that we all have, the opposition parties, academics, pundits, to make sure that public opinion, even if it does go dormant sometimes, is clearly, on fundamental issues like this, awakened, or that it is “awakenable”. We just have to keep attention on it.

Again, I think it is now the perception of this government—but I'm sure the message has been read by the Liberals as well—that this is something one does for partisan advantage at one's peril, because the population doesn't seem to like this and seems to have principled, moral grounds for not liking it.

One of the most heartening things was getting emails from Conservatives, from people who said, “I'm a Conservative and I don't like this at all.” When it comes not to this policy or that policy or how you feel about the government's view about bilingualism in the court—this is something that has to do with the protection of our institutions, the institutions that we Conservatives, New Democrats, Liberals, Blocquistes, all share—I think it is an issue on which public opinion can be among the sorts of disincentive that we reach for.

This is democracy. If we just assume, about public opinion, “Well, look at what happened with the election thing; we can't count on the public to keep the feet of the politicans to the coals”, it's a depressing message.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

● (1240)

The Chair: Great, perfect; we're moving along very well. I think we have time for at least a two-minute round.

From the official opposition, we'll hear Monsieur Proulx.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Weinstock, thank you for being with us this morning.

You are from the Université de Montréal, so you probably have a better understanding of Quebec than the previous witness, who admitted it was not his strength at all. In your opinion, what could the impact be of the French translation of a Facebook website, like the one our friend created? To what extent do you think that could influence the initiative, not just now but in the long run? There is a ripple effect: one person participates and if it works for that person, it will work for another. It is often like that with social networking sites, if we can call them that. But in the medium and long terms, what impact do you think that can have on the public, on people who are more or less disillusioned by politics and who, all of a sudden, become members of a protest group on the Web? Do you think there would be a more lasting effect beyond the heat of the moment?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: I will leave all my expertise aside to answer as a father instead. I have three children, including a daughter of almost 15. TV is like an UFO to her. We could have no TV and that would not make a difference to her.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: But there is the computer.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: There is the computer. She spends her life on the Internet. She learns stuff on the Internet. I imagine she also spends a little time chatting with her friends, but she learns things, and not only on Wikipedia. Let me go back to an argument that was raised in the context of cultural and generational shift. Our young people no longer learn about politics in the same way we did. I will be 47 next week, and I have always been in the habit of turning on the TV to listen to Bernard Derome at the time or Lloyd Robertson. When we think about it, young people, our children have greater and faster access potentially. Lloyd and Bernard would last for half an hour. But, on the Internet, we find an unimaginable wealth of resources. One of the first reactions of the kids to the letter—which we have put up on the Internet simply to make things easier so people could go see it and sign it—was that it was awesome.

Now, what? Now, what are you gonna put up there? You should have a website that you update regularly with opinion topics, information bits on the way Parliament works, a type of website that defends Canadian democracy. The problem is that I am obviously not paid for that and there are only 24 hours in a day to do all the things we have to do.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: You should stop watching TV then.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: Yes, I should. And hockey takes time, especially when the Montreal Canadiens are in the playoffs till May.

I have a BlackBerry and an iPhone in my pocket. I am not exactly a technophobe, but, for people our age, using the Internet is not as deeply rooted a part of our way of life as it is for our children. If what we want is to create a new political culture in Parliament by creating a minority government culture, but also by creating a new ethos of democratic vigilance in the public, we really cannot overlook these kinds of tools.

● (1245)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. We went a little over.

Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Thank you.

This has been very interesting, because you talked on a couple things, not just prorogation but the culture within the House of Commons and the culture among MPs. Part of that culture is also the media. We work in a world here in Ottawa where the media looks for a specific clip or a specific soundbite, and it's not one of a committee like this that gets along and works together; it's one of antagonistism, who can get the best shot out there, who can say the meanest thing and get on the news. And that's the culture we work in outside these rooms.

I had a situation during prorogation. Three weeks before that period I went to California with my 80-year-old dad to see his 92-year-old cousin. While I was there I was working on some cases in Haiti, getting some people out just after the earthquake. The first day of prorogation, a blogger picks up a report from two weeks earlier and says that I'm in California. We went to the media and asked them to correct it, and they didn't. Or they did very little. I got blasted in an article three days later in a local paper saying that politicians are all bad people because they're out holidaying during prorogation, which is absolutely false. If he would have picked up the phone and called me he would have caught me in my office in the riding. But it seems that we've got a culture hear in Ottawa where if I can get one on top of Ms. Gagnon, I have to do that, because otherwise the media won't look at me as a serious contender here in Ottawa. How you break that culture is a challenge.

Where I come back to prorogation on this is I wonder if the protest was the actual prorogation, or was a protest about the culture and prorogation the straw that broke the camel's back?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: I think you're absolutely right that we have to look at prorogation in a bigger context. It's a symptom of a wider malaise, perhaps both within this institution and in the perception of this institution by the Canadian population. This is another reason why the fix is the rules. We might fix prorogation.... Sean Avery can't wave his arms in front of Martin Brodeur any more, because now there's a Sean Avery rule, but he can do other stuff that's just as obnoxious. If we don't change the culture that creates the Sean Averys, then we have a problem.

I'll say one thing about the media, and this goes back to the discussion we were just having. It might feel to you, because they talk about you, that they are all-powerful, but the traditional media are in a state of extreme vulnerability. How many newspapers will there be in this country in ten years? I don't know—not that many. The kids aren't reading the papers any more. Even television.... Traditional media are in a state of crisis. I think what we have to look towards is not so much how we change the media we have; we should look at how we can exploit, and I use that term in a positive sense, the new media that are arising to set them up from the very beginning in ways that are more productive, more non-partisan than they might previously have been.

This is the third or fourth time I've appeared in a committee like this in my life. There's a world of difference between the sound bites you get on the news about what happens in the House and what happens here. Here there are people working together. I mean, everybody should be able to come into one of these meetings to have their sense of the health of our democracy strengthened, but that's not what is going to be reported.

I think we're living through a generational shift in the way in which people in this country, the young people, consume information. They're not consuming information through the traditional media; they are consuming information on the Internet. And I think we have a challenge as a society to make sure that this new channel of information gets set up in a way that is less toxic, less gotcha journalism, and more deep down, going after....

Mr. Randy Hoback: Yes, I'd agree with that. The thing I would say, though....

The Chair: Mr. Hoback, I'm really sorry, but I do find that politicians' perception of time is drastically different from what they actually thought. I did set limits at the start of this. Thank you.

Monsieur Malo, are you taking a round? Welcome today, by the way.

● (1250)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Malo (Verchères—Les Patriotes, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I am happy to be here with you.

Mr. Weinstock, thank you for being here.

In your opening remarks, you said that this constitutional convention played a much more important role than previously. The legislation or the Standing Orders then play a secondary role compared to the constitutional convention.

You also said that the popular movements that resulted from prorogation could now influence the government in the event of a repeat. You can fine-tune my remarks if you wish. How can those movements, if at all, influence the constitutional conventions that govern us?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: The constitutional negotiations—my apologies, we are bargaining at the Université de Montréal—I mean, the constitutional conventions that govern us in terms of prorogation are already relatively well established. I did some thinking after writing the letter. Since, for most of our history, we had a tradition of governments with large majorities, prorogation was used for technical purposes, to indicate the time for a new Speech from the Throne, a new legislative agenda. That being said, I still think the constitutional conventions are relatively solid, but Mr. Harper's recent prorogations and also one by Mr. Chrétien during the sponsorship scandal have begun to erode them. To make a long story short, I do not think there should be new constitutional conventions, but we should remember that there already are some that, up to a few years ago, set the conditions and the climate in a pretty effective way for the use of prorogation power by the prime minister.

You are wondering about the potential impact of these popular movements. Right at the start of the discussion with Ms. Jennings, I think, we were talking about the fact that the Conservative government has not gone a long way towards any proposals made by the opposition. The public reaction to last year's prorogation could have resulted in a higher political price for continuing to turn the opposition down flat. I do not have my crystal ball with me, but that is where I might possibly see the impact to be.

Mr. Luc Malo: So, you think that perhaps...

The Chair: Mr. Malo...

Mr. Luc Malo: Is that it?

[*English*]

The Chair: I know. You see how fast it goes when we're having fun.

Mr. Christopherson, may I offer you a couple of minutes? Mr. Albrecht would also like a couple of minutes if we can get them in before we finish, please.

Mr. David Christopherson: What have you got to offer, Harold?

The Chair: I like the negotiation.

Mr. David Christopherson: This is a name game, by the way. That's my middle name.

Here's what I wanted to ask you. I'm going to play devil's advocate about the new media and the other side of it. I'm of that generation for which, you said, it is something we've gone to as opposed to it being part of us. I see it with my 17-year-old daughter. It's night and day.

However, I've been around politics for an awfully long time, too, in all three orders of government, and one thing I know about politicians and politics is that it's very adaptive. Radio came along, and you could argue that at the time it was going to give the public a whole new awareness. And it did, but the politicians adapted. Then TV came along, and it was much the same thing. Politicians adapted. Now we have all the social sites—Twitter and everything. You know, blogs all seem normal now, but it was just a few years ago that they didn't exist, and now people have blog masters. In other words, politicians have hired people.

Whatever the public tries to do in a pure way to talk, we're going to find a way, and the system is going to find a way to get in there and attempt to spin it and manipulate it, if not to affect the outcome, at the very least, then to affect appearance. We're very much like a Hollywood movie set. You have to take a look at what's behind what you're looking at.

There's this notion that it's going to provide a new ability for the public, by itself, to be a different participant in politics. Yet I still see politicians and politics being able to adapt to make it work for them too, leaving us in the same sort of spot after we've gone through a transformative process.

What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: I don't want to sound like an Internet Pollyanna, because I'm not one. I can see some limits. But one of the things I really think is a strength of the Internet as opposed to other forms of communication is the entry cost and how low entry costs are. Also, on obstacles to get there, you don't need a licence to broadcast on the Internet. All you need is a....

● (1255)

Mr. David Christopherson: It's the participatory aspect, you think.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: It's the fact that you don't have to have a lot of money or a lawyer to get a blog running.

Mr. David Christopherson: You need those after you're elected.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: I think a person who looks at the Internet right now to find out what people are thinking about prorogation sees a much more democratic space.

Why I'm not a Pollyanna is because I see the downside of that, which is, of course, quality control. Tomorrow I'll be attending a meeting of the new public health ethics committee that's been set up by David Butler-Jones, and I know that one of the issues they're concerned about is the public health impact of the Internet. It's not that our kids are getting obese using the Internet but rather that they're getting all kinds of nonsense information about health.

All things being equal, it's the same thing with politics. There's a lot more information out there. It is therefore more democratic and perhaps more neutral, because it's harder to control by established interests. But you probably have a lot more quackery.

I think lowering of the entry cost is something that does have a positive impact.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Albrecht.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Professor, for being here. I really found this very informative. Thank you for pointing out that MPs may in fact be working as hard in their constituencies as when they're here.

I have a son who's a high school teacher, and I kid him that there are two good reasons to be a teacher—July and August. But then I know that he also does work a lot during the summer, as well.

Back to the letter you wrote in January, I guess I would categorize it as being fairly hard-hitting. I'll leave it at that. Then today you pointed out that with a minority government situation, it's natural for us to reach for tools that, as you said, might not be needed in any other situation. If you were to write your letter today, would it be different?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: Yes, I think it would be a little different. As a philosopher, I get paid to think critically, including about things we've done ourselves. I tend not to agree with myself an hour ago.

Mr. David Christopherson: Should we call you back?

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: One point you fastened onto there was that there is a generation of politicians, of which Mr. Harper is definitely a part, that just can't conceive, perhaps—it's just not in their DNA—of minority government as a state of normalcy and not an aberration that we will shortly be getting out of. It might be a natural reflex—one which, I hasten to add, should be counteracted for the greater good—to say, "How can I make this thing function as if it were a majority?"

That's problematic, for the reasons I indicated in my letter, which I won't get back into, but also because what the Canadian population has asked for through its vote is not a minority that acts as if it were a majority. It wants, and robustly, because we're now three elections into this minority part of our history, a sort of new normal, a new way of behaving in Parliament.

You can't get people's attention if you're not a bit hard-hitting for reasons that....

Mr. Harold Albrecht: So in some ways this was your question period version, and what you're giving us today is the committee version.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: I was hoping to make the point in a non-partisan way. As I said, I did get the criticism from a lot of editorialists that this is just somebody who's probably a Liberal or a New Democrat or a Bloquiste. I've never been a member of any political party. The hope I had and the gratification I had was from hearing from Conservative voters that this was an issue that is really non-partisan.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor. It's been a wonderful hour.

I got a couple of messages from your time here today. First of all, I love that we shouldn't try to put together "gotcha" mechanisms to fix a problem like this. And second, during the month of May, even if Canadians are paying attention, they're only paying attention to the playoffs, so we probably could do anything we want.

Mr. Daniel Weinstock: That's as long as we still have Canadian teams in the playoffs. Let's hope that we have a longer run of them.

The Chair: A point of order, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chairman, we received a research study from our analyst on rules of order that relate to prorogation in the various provincial assemblies. One of the things we had asked for, and I hope we can renew this ask, was a history of prorogations in the various....

● (1300)

The Chair: You wanted it in those legislatures also?

Mr. Scott Reid: That's right.

The Chair: I read the one about what other legislatures' rules on prorogation are. Can we get a list of when prorogation has actually been used in the provincial legislatures? Is that okay with the committee? Yes?

Go ahead, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair. I just have a question.

At the next meeting, it looks as if we have three presentations for the same two hours. I just wondered how we ended up with that, and how did we choose which are three and which are two?

The Chair: It's when people can attend. When we have a certain number of dates that are open and three say yes to one, and we can't get any of them to move, that's what happens to us.

Mr. David Christopherson: I only ask because of course one of the witnesses is a very well-known participant in these public discussions.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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