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Chair

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia

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● (1405)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone, including the members of the committee, those in attendance and those watching us on television.

I remind you that taking photographs is no longer permitted at this stage. I believe you have taken a number of them, so it should be okay.

[English]

Good afternoon to all, and welcome to the third meeting of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform. It's our third meeting, but our very first with witnesses.

Yes, Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Before you begin, Mr. Chair, I have to confess that when we discussed witnesses and the importance of having longer presentations from some of the really important witnesses, of whom the minister is certainly one, I did not anticipate that our meeting with her would be so structured that we would have a lengthy presentation but very, very brief questions and answers, which is what happens as a consequence of the steering committee's being immediately after this one.

I wonder if we could push back the steering committee by half an hour, thereby allowing the rounds of questions for each MP to be extended by a couple of minutes.

The Chair: First of all, I'd like to welcome the minister to the committee. *Eid Mubarak*. Thank you for being here on Eid. We appreciate it very much.

The request by Mr. Reid is that we extend the sitting a little bit longer. Right now we have 30 minutes or less for the minister, depending on how much time the minister needs. Then we were planning on having one hour of questions. There's a request here by Mr. Reid to extend that one hour to, I don't know, an hour and 15 minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid: That would do, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: First, I'll ask the minister if she is available to stay for an extra 15 minutes.

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions): Mr. Chair, thank you for your welcome. I'm happy to stay an additional 15 minutes if the members feel the need to have me here for longer.

The Chair: I sense, from looking around, that people think that's a good idea. Thank you very much for accommodating us.

[Translation]

Minister Monsef is accompanied by Isabelle Mondou, who is the assistant secretary to the cabinet and counsel to the Clerk of the Privy Council.

Welcome.

Ms. Isabelle Mondou (Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet and Counsel to the Clerk of the Privy Council, Privy Council Office): Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Without further ado, I would invite the minister to make her presentation.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Thank you, Mr. Chair, honourable members of this committee, the various team members, and of course members of the media.

I am delighted to join you here today on this traditional Algonquin territory, and to thank you for the opportunity to be your first witness.

I am pleased to be here on Eid, an important celebration for Muslims around the world. I'll take this opportunity to wish *Eid Mubarak* to Canadians in this country celebrating Eid. I promise my family members who are watching this at home that I will be home very soon.

As you mentioned, Mr. Chair, I have the great privilege of working with members of the Privy Council. Isabelle Mondou, assistant secretary and counsel to the Clerk, is here to assist with any technical questions.

I want to thank the members of my small but mighty team for devoting their time and talent to this important initiative we have all undertaken, and to express my deep appreciation to each of you. I know that the work that each of you has taken on is quite a commitment. I suspect there are many important private and public demands on your time. Despite this, you have committed to undertaking a comprehensive examination of electoral reform options. To each of you, I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude on behalf of the government.

Mr. Chair, the establishment of this committee in its current form and specific membership is the result of collaboration among political parties and represents the embracing of ideas that come not just from the government, but political opposition parties as well. This was the result of listening to Canadians and acting on what we heard from political parties. I believe this spirit of collaboration should be a hallmark of the work that all of us will do together on this file. Electoral reform, to be successfully achieved, needs to be built on co-operation among political parties, and have the broad support of Canadians.

I am reminded of a piece of advice that a former cabinet minister received as he assumed his place in cabinet, by the then-deputy prime minister, Herb Gray, that if you insist on having all of your views prevail all of the time, and if your colleagues also insist that all of their views need to prevail all of the time, then no one will achieve anything any of the time.

I believe the Honourable Herb Gray provided wise counsel. In moving forward, I believe the views and perspectives of all parties and of all Canadians will be important in informing the eventual approach that we adopt. This is not to suggest that electoral reform should not cause much debate or discussion. Each of us, as parliamentarians, has a responsibility to provide Canadians with a variety of perspectives on how we may move forward on this, and indeed on any public policy issue. Providing Canadians with vigorous study and debate is key to this process, and not doing so would be a disservice and unlikely to achieve fundamental reform.

I trust that the perspectives each of you bring to this table will be shaped by the testimony you hear from experts, political practitioners, and everyday Canadians. Those perspectives, I suspect, will also be based on deeply held political views each of us hold, and which inform the policies and the platforms that each of our parties stand for.

Mr. Chair, I believe the committee will work best when the members debate ideas brought forward within the context of these values, political and personal, that each of us and our respective parties hold. This may not always be the easy way, but I do believe that it is this kind of collaboration that holds the greatest potential for meaningful change.

I am also hopeful, Mr. Chair, that the product of your deliberation goes beyond the tabling of five minority reports outlining individual party positions, but rather represents the development towards a compromise that seeks to reflect our own views and those of our colleagues, as well as all Canadians.

● (1410)

In providing additional comments this afternoon, Mr. Chair, I'd like to touch on four topics, including, first, why I believe it's important to move to a system other than first past the post; second, the values that I believe should help shape any alternative system; third, how we go about consulting Canadians; and fourth and finally, the issue of obtaining the support of Canadians and moving forward with any specific changes.

Some have pointed out that Canada is a mature, successful democracy whose citizens enjoy a high standard of living and a level of political freedom that is the envy of the world. They question why

we would consider changing such a successful democracy. Although I accept the premise of that thought, I do not agree with the conclusion. Simply pointing out that something works is not a reason not to try to make it better. First past the post is an antiquated system designed to meet the realities of 19th century Canada and not designed to operate within our multi-party democracy.

We require an electoral system that provides a stronger link between the democratic will of Canadians and election results. As pointed out by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, during the course of the 20th century, a number of countries have opted to move away from first past the post, from Australia in 1918 to New Zealand in 1993. More tellingly, few democracies in the modern era have gone the other way and adopted first past the post as their electoral model. There are good reasons for this: first past the post is a voting system that generates disparities between votes gained and the number of seats secured.

Since 1960 we've had 10 elections that resulted in majority governments, but only in one case, in 1984, did the winning party receive more than 50% of the vote. Under first past the post, parties achieving similar or same percentages of the vote may not always garner a similar number of seats. Look at the election in 1997 as an example, in which the Reform Party garnered 18.7% of the vote and received 60 seats, whereas the Progressive Conservatives garnered 18.8% of the vote—virtually the same—but received only 20 seats. The Reform Party garnered the same percentage, but 40 less seats. In the previous election, in 1993 the Progressive Conservatives won 16% of the vote but only two seats; meanwhile, the Bloc Québécois received 13.5% of the popular vote and 54 seats. First past the post tends to favour parties with regional, rather than national, appeal.

First past the post also regularly elects MPs for whom the majority of constituents did not vote. In the most recent election, less than 40% of those elected—including me—were supported by a majority of their constituents.

Beyond this, Mr. Chair, Canadians have indicated that they want change in their electoral system. In the last election, 63% of Canadians voted for parties that clearly stated they wanted an alternative to first past the post, and Canadians expect us to keep our promises.

As I have said in the House on many occasions as the Minister of Democratic Institutions, I've come to this process with an open mind, prepared to be convinced by persuasive and respectful arguments on what type of electoral system would best replace first past the post, recognizing that no system is perfect.

I believe that our discussions and those of Canadians need to be shaped by the guiding principles set out in the committee's mandate. They reflect our sense of fairness and inclusion as Canadians. The reality is that a variety of systems could satisfy each of the principles in different ways, depending on the values, choices, and priorities of Canadians.

•(1415)

I'll take a moment if I may to remind everyone of the principles adopted by the House in establishing the committee. They are as follows: first, restoring the effectiveness and legitimacy of the voting system by reducing distortions and strengthening the link between voter intention and electoral results; second, encouraging greater engagement and participation in the democratic process, including fostering civility, consensus building, and social cohesion; third, supporting accessibility and inclusiveness for all eligible voters and avoiding undue complexity in the voting process; fourth, safeguarding the integrity of our voting system; and fifth, taking into consideration the accountability of local representation.

Mr. Chair, these concepts of legitimacy, engagement, inclusion, integrity, and local representation belong to all of us. They provide a meaningful and accessible starting point for a national dialogue on electoral reform. They are meant to spark debate and deliberations. These principles are not meant to be prescriptive or limiting. Their purpose is to serve as an invitation to this conversation and not a conclusion.

I believe the principles give all of us, including the committee trusted with this work, a common frame of reference that enables Canadians to participate in a sustained conversation about their priorities, to ask thoughtful questions, and truly to listen to one another. We have to start there before examining the technicalities of various electoral systems.

I'll take this moment to pause and express my delight. We have run out of seats, and it appears that more chairs are being placed in this room. This is a good sign.

As I've said on many occasions, Mr. Chair, the government is not prepared to proceed without the broad support of Canadians. To achieve that support, it is critical that our nation be engaged in the process of developing solutions to the challenges of our electoral system.

It is our responsibility to provide resources that allow as many Canadians as possible to learn about the various options of electoral reform, to learn about the complexities involved, to consider the possible impacts of any changes, and to provide an informed opinion on how the government should proceed.

This engagement process needs to be crafted in a way that reaches out to all Canadians and not just to the usual suspects, some of whom are in this room right now.

A key purpose of electoral reform should be to engage Canadians who have historically not been involved in our democratic institutions. We need to reach out to those who often face greater barriers within the electoral processes. They include new Canadians, indigenous persons, people of modest economic means, young Canadians, those living in rural and remote communities, those with disabilities and exceptionalities, and others whose voices have been silent in the past.

To accomplish this, we need to use new and creative tools in addition to those we have employed in the past. This includes the important work being done by this committee, but also community town halls, academic symposia, surveying, and importantly, social

media, as that is how many Canadians, especially those under the age of 45, interact and carry out discussions. In 2016, Facebook, Twitter, and similar platforms are not a frivolous novelty, but a primary tool to engage with each other and with private and public institutions, and an important resource we cannot overlook.

•(1420)

With that in mind, it's important that the committee will also duly be considering other reforms noted in the motion—online and mandatory voting—in the work that it does between now and December 1, 2016. Online voting and similar reforms that embrace the technological advances we have today should be seen as ways to increase participation by removing barriers that may exist for some Canadians. For others, these may simply represent preferred forms of engagement in the process. At all times, though, there should always be a balance between the security and the integrity of the voting process. Mandatory voting, similarly, reflects a concept that some view as a means to a more participatory democracy, and as such is practised in varying forms in 22 countries around the world. My hope is that the committee and the experts you will hear from will consider the merits of all sides of this conversation. I know we will collectively benefit from that work.

Speaking of those very conversations, I would like to take a moment to speak about resources for Canadians hoping to engage in, and even host, these conversations. To support the national dialogue on electoral reform, we have developed a dialogue guide that is intended to help potential organizers with the planning, coordination, and reporting of these events. Keeping in mind the need to engage more than the usual suspects, this guide is intended for any Canadian in any community in any part of the country who may wish to use it. I'm tabling a copy of this resource with members of the committee today and will be making it available to the public electronically as well. I believe a copy of it is being circulated as we speak.

This guide is not meant to be prescriptive or to compete with the committee's work, but rather to provide citizens, organizations, and MPs, if they wish, with a resource for their consideration. Furthermore, when Canadians have these conversations, I trust that the committee will welcome hearing from them so that Canadians will know that their views and efforts are directly contributing to the deliberations and report of the committee.

I see you leafing through it already. That is a good sign, too.

I'll also be announcing further details of the complementary outreach plans that my parliamentary secretary, Mark Holland, and I will be putting in place over the summer and early fall to meet with Canadians across this great nation. Please encourage those who are interested to keep an eye on the canada.ca/democracy web page, where they can find and download the dialogue guide and engage with further resources and find up-to-date information and news on upcoming events, join the conversation on social media, and learn how every Canadian can have their voice heard in this process.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to make it clear that whatever method we use to enact electoral change, this government is committed to moving forward with a modernized electoral system only with the broad support of Canadians.

As part of this committee's mandate, you have been directed to study and advise on additional methods for obtaining the views of Canadians. As I've said in the past, Mr. Chair, although I recognize that a referendum is one way of seeking clarity from Canadians, I remain to be convinced that it is the best way. Referenda do not easily lend themselves to people effectively deciding complex issues. They can, and often have, led to deep divisions among Canadian and within other societies, divisions that have not been easily overcome. Although everyone has the ability to vote in a referendum, almost half of eligible voters have not done so in the recent referenda on electoral reform. I believe we can do better. A democracy that is comfortable with half its population not voting is a democracy in need of renewal and reform.

● (1425)

A study conducted by Statistics Canada after the 2011 election confirmed that many groups—sometimes the most marginalized—do not participate in elections. The study found that those under the age of 45 vote in lower numbers than those over 45; those with a high school diploma vote in lower numbers than those educated in college or university; that single parents vote in lower numbers than married people; and that those who immigrated to Canada in the last five years, or even 15 years, vote in lower numbers than those who are Canadian born; those who rent their homes vote in lower numbers than those who own their home; those who live in rural areas vote in lower numbers than those who live in cities; and that those who are unemployed vote in lower numbers than those who are employed.

Mr. Chair, we can imagine that it could be similar in the context of a referendum. My apprehension about a referendum is the possibility that it will provide an incomplete picture of what Canadians want. I believe we need to do better than that, and I look to the committee to examine various methods for engagement and to provide its advice on the ways to determine the will of Canadians.

Canadian history is full of examples of fundamental changes being made to our electoral system through legislation approved by Parliament, including in 1874 when Canada adopted the secret ballot. In 1918 we began to expand and extend the franchise to women. In 1920 we created the office of the Chief Electoral Officer. In 1960 we extended the franchise to indigenous peoples here in Canada. In 1970 we extended the franchise to young adults—those between the ages of 18 and 21—and in 1996 we introduced the permanent voters list.

These changes reflect the nature of a representative democracy, and although some were controversial in their time, in retrospect they all seem like obvious reforms undertaken by the Parliament of Canada.

Mr. Chair, Canada is a very special country with one of the most admirable records of embracing democratic processes to elect its leaders and to periodically and peacefully and seamlessly transfer power from one party to another. Our democratic reform initiative is about making our system—which has many strengths—better, and to improve what we currently have. We know that here in Canada better is always possible.

This electoral reform initiative is about continuing a process that has seen us make significant and positive changes over the past 149

years, including the expansion of the franchise to indigenous persons and to women, protecting the integrity of the process, and responding to the evolving reality of a changing world.

As colleagues who serve in this institution, I ask for your help, for your guidance, and for your advice as we strive to modernize our electoral system; to provide opportunities for those who have not participated in the past; and to explore how modern technology can enhance the democratic process. Together we can and will make our vibrant democracy even stronger and give every citizen the opportunity to shape our future.

● (1430)

I'm very much looking forward to working with this committee and am thankful for the opportunity to speak with members today, Mr. Chair. I'd be happy to answer any questions that members may have.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister, for that presentation.

We've done the math, or I should say the clerk did the math, and we have six-and-a-half minutes per question.

[*Translation*]

We will follow the order we have already set, starting with the Liberal Party.

Ms. Romanado, go ahead.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Eid Mubarak.

Minister, thank you very much for joining us today. I know that this is a holiday for your family, so we appreciate your being here.

[*English*]

I want to thank you again for explaining a little bit the rationale for what we're doing and for your commitment to work with the committee.

What do you think are some of the challenges or barriers in our current electoral system that are preventing folks from coming out and voting in large numbers?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Thank you very much for the question and kicking off our debate here together.

As I mentioned in my speech, while first past the post has many strengths that we have benefited from over the past 149 years, the reality is that it's a system that was designed for 19th century Canada. Canada was a very different place then. It has a tendency to distort voter intentions. It's a system that tends to make people feel like their vote doesn't always matter. As a result, it leads to voter apathy and lower voter turnout.

As the evidence and other nations are showing us, there are better ways to go about electing representatives. Frankly, this is a conversation that has been happening in various jurisdictions for years. It's an issue that's been discussed federally for over 10 years, and here we are with a government that has the political will needed to explore this important Canadian issue at a national level. I'm thankful that with all of you, we will be seizing this opportunity and allowing Canadians across the nation to have their voices heard in this process and to come up with an alternative that matches our values as Canadians, as well as the realities of our time.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Some suggest that Canadians are happy with the current system. There is the old saying, "If it's not broke, don't fix it." What are your thoughts on this? Why does the government want to change the current system?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Through you, Mr. Chair, this was a commitment made not just by our party during the election but also by many parties to their constituents, that they would explore and implement new ways of voting should they form government. For us, it wasn't something that we as a party decided was important. It's a commitment in our platform based on the conversations that our then-leader, our current Prime Minister, had with Canadians from coast to coast to coast about the issues that mattered to them, about the Canada they want to live in, about ways to enhance the health of our democratic institutions.

The reason we put forward this piece of our policy platform is that it's what we heard from Canadians. Over 60% of Canadians ended up voting for parties that clearly stated their commitment to implementing a different way of voting. While our system works, it can be better. The simple fact that something works is no reason not to make it better, and this is one commitment that we made to Canadians. Canadians expect us to deliver on our commitments and that's why you're all here today.

● (1435)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: You mentioned the national engagement process and you elaborated a little bit in your speech about different stakeholders or citizens who didn't vote. You mentioned that those who are unemployed and those who are in rural areas tend to vote less, and so on and so forth. What are your thoughts on reaching out to those who normally wouldn't be part of the democratic process to get their advice and suggestions on what we should be doing? Could you elaborate a little bit on that?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: This is, I think, a main challenge and opportunity for me but also for all of you. There are those who are new to this country; those whose ancestors have always been here, the indigenous peoples of this land; those with disabilities, exceptionalities; and young people, who we know are definitely amongst those who do not vote in the numbers we'd like to see them voting in. Each group faces specific challenges and barriers. There are many ways we can go about this. It's why we're encouraging a multi-channel way of engaging with Canadians, with several platforms.

One way we need to do this work is through the work that all of you do. Another way to do this is that MPs have a really good understanding of the people in their ridings. They have the connections and the relationships built with the organizations supporting these specific groups and communities. They can

leverage those connections. Another way to do so is through various online channels and social media.

One further way to do so is the resource that we introduced here today. The guide that we have provided allows for grade 5 students, allows for high school students, and allows for those groups who don't traditionally find an easy path to participation to engage in this process.

Additionally, you have been asked to provide additional ways of seeking Canadians' views. I'm looking forward to your recommendations on that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I have to go to Mr. Reid now.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Welcome, Minister.

Minister, on May 10, at the press conference when you established this committee, you said, and I quote, "A referendum is one of a number of tools that can be used to engage Canadians". Moreover, your colleague, Dominic LeBlanc, said that it was quite premature for us to be deciding on whether or not we should have a referendum or not.

However, based on what you said today, it sounds like you have firmly shut the door. There will be no referendum on your government's proposed new electoral system under any circumstances. Is that correct?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Through you, Mr. Chair, I want to thank the honourable member for his commitment to this file. I look forward to the important work he does on this committee.

I would like to go back to the motion the House adopted that allowed this committee to come together, which clearly states that part of our mandate, as parliamentarians serving on this committee, would be to advise the government on what the best way for us to obtain the broad support of Canadians might be. I've stated my personal position on this, based on what we've seen happen here in Canada and in the past, that a referendum is not the best way to reach out to those groups who don't traditionally engage—

Mr. Scott Reid: I appreciate that, Minister. My question then becomes, are you saying that the committee is or is not in a position to recommend a referendum? That is, you don't care whether it recommends a referendum, you don't care whether Canadians want a referendum, we won't have a referendum. Or are you open to it?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Could you repeat the part after you said that I don't care? I missed that.

● (1440)

Mr. Scott Reid: When you said we're looking at a variety of mechanisms... It's in the wording of the motion establishing the committee, a change you yourself made. The question is, are you saying that a referendum is not one of the consultation mechanisms that the committee can look at? Is it out, or is it something that is a possibility?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: This committee itself is a reminder that this government is open to various parties' positions. One thing we did in the amended motion that we put forward on June 2, Mr. Reid, is provide an amendment that reads like this: "that the Committee be directed to study and advise on additional methods for obtaining the views of Canadians". It is up to you to hear from Canadians. It is up to you to find out what values—

Mr. Scott Reid: If the committee recommended a referendum, would you accept that a referendum is necessary?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: If that is what the committee recommends, if that is what you hear from Canadians, if you arrive at a consensus that this is the best way to engage Canadians in 2016, then it is incumbent upon me and the government to take that seriously.

Mr. Scott Reid: Does that mean you would then have a referendum if there were that recommendation?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I'm going to do something that I know you very much—

Mr. Scott Reid: Well, let me rephrase that: would you say no?

The Chair: Mr. Reid—

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Would you like me to finish my sentence? No?

The Chair: Mr. Reid, please let the minister answer.

Mr. Scott Reid: Fair enough.

The Chair: Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I'm going to do something that I know many folks appreciate. This process as a whole is an exciting prospect for all of us. This process has at least three stages. There's the first stage of hearing from Canadians. We can't do this process without hearing from them. We can't arrive at a conclusion without hearing from them. So we need to hear from them, and that is why your work is going to be so valuable.

The second stage is you deliberating and hopefully coming up with a report that reflects the consensus you have arrived at on the various aspects of your mandate. Yes, tell us which system you heard from Canadians that clearly they prefer. Do we consider online voting? Do we consider mandatory voting?

Then the third step, Mr. Reid, is determining whether this system that we are about to propose has the broad support of Canadians.

I know you are eager to jump to the third step, but we are only at the first step, and I'm looking forward to your recommendations on December 1.

Mr. Scott Reid: Minister, you won't say no to a referendum here. You will not say no. I've asked you directly. So now let me posit to you this thought. A variety of steps need to take place in advance of holding a referendum. Certain commentators—including Jean-Pierre Kingsley, who will be testifying before us tomorrow—have observed that the Referendum Act is in need of updating. Amendments have to be made to the act or new legislation has to be done, or else the option of referendum ceases to exist. It simply falls off the range of possibilities regardless of what this committee decides, regardless of what Canadians want.

My question to you, therefore, is this. Are you taking any measures in your department to update the Referendum Act or to

engage in other legislation in order to ensure that a referendum could take place, if it proved that it was desirable, so that we do not face the situation of having a new system imposed in 2019 without the approval of Canadians after there has been an agreement that we ought to be having a referendum? Would you answer that, please?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I'll answer all your questions.

First of all, I'm thankful that your witnesses tomorrow are the current and former chief electoral officers. They bring a wealth of knowledge. I hope their counsel and their guidance are concepts and contributions that you will continue to rely upon, as I have.

It is true that there is legislation that needs to be amended. The Referendum Act does need to be aligned with the Elections Act. But I believe it is premature to make those changes. It's putting the cart before the horse to arrive at a conclusion before you folks have even begun to travel the country.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chair, in the remaining moments I have left

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Scott Reid: —I just want to make the point that the cart is put before the horse if you decide not to update the Referendum Act, because it becomes impossible under any circumstances, no matter how strong the consensus, to have a referendum if you don't take the initiative to start updating the act.

So I ask again, what are you doing to update the Referendum Act so that the cart is not put before the horse and so that we do not set out a new system without a referendum if that is what ultimately we decide we should be having?

The Chair: Mr. Reid, your time is up. Maybe another member will continue on that point.

We have Mr. Christopherson now.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity.

I'll just say, I wish the Conservatives had been a fraction more interested in public input when they were ramming through the unfair elections act in the last Parliament, but I don't want to be small minded.

I'll begin by wishing all of my Muslim sisters and brothers in Hamilton and across the country *Eid Mubarak*. I was pleased to be at my local downtown Hamilton mosque on Monday night to break the fast with my friends.

If I may be allowed one little bit of an indulgence, Chair, I would point out that the Broadbent Institute is obviously very much engaged in this issue. If you would allow me, I will recognize the fact that the former leader of the federal NDP and the man who was the leader of the party when I first ran in 1984, Ed Broadbent, is with us here today. We all know his commitment to Canadian democracy. It's always good to see Ed.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. David Christopherson: Minister, I need some help with clarification. It's pretty clear where the Conservatives are. They just want to stay with status quo. They want first past the post. That's clear. Everything they are talking about supports that whole thing so we at least know where they are.

We favour proportional representation. We have a preferred model, but we're flexible, and ultimately we believe PR needs to be brought here to Canada to take that next step in modernizing and improving our democracy.

Now when it comes to the government, it's a little less clear. At one point, in fact, even trying to get this all set up, you will recall we finally got something going the night that you, Mr. Cullen, and I, and Mr. Holland, and your chief of staff met and hammered out the deal that got us to this point. But up until then, we had been all over the map with this government, up to and including the government House leader holding his breath, and stamping his feet, and saying there wasn't even going to be a committee because he couldn't get his way. That's an issue that doesn't speak to clarity of thought and focus of purpose.

The Prime Minister has said that his preference is the alternate ranked voting system. That's what he likes, and he's already on the record having said that. You have come out on behalf of your government, and through you, Chair, and said you don't believe that first past the post serves us any further. You say you're neutral, and yet it wasn't that long ago that the Privy Council Office hired Mr. Derek Alton who's the co-founder of the group 123Guelph, which advocates the use of the alternate ranked ballot.

So it's really unclear. We know where the Cons are, we know where the New Democrats are. I'm hearing the Liberals saying that they're open, but quite frankly, they've been all over the map. Can you help me and provide some clarity on what you really are open to, because there is always this issue that it looks like what you want out of this is the alternative ranked ballot system. If that's so, say so, but commit to it. But, no, the government's saying "we're wide open".

I've laid out the case where you have been everywhere. Can you help us understand where you are, and what your government's intent is.

• (1445)

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I would like to thank the honourable member for his work and his ongoing dedication to making this country and this place better.

I know over the last 10 years a perception may have developed that there's only one way and one view within any given caucus, especially that of a governing party. That's not the way we do things. We respect and recognize that there is a diverse range of opinions on this particular matter, and that diverse range of opinions will vary across this nation.

We haven't arrived at a final conclusion. We haven't made up our mind about any given system. I've come to this with an open mind and would like to recognize what a unique opportunity this is.

What the Prime Minister has tasked me with is the establishment of this committee so together we may go and hear from Canadians.

This isn't about us. This isn't about our parties. This is Canadians' system. This is their electoral system. We know the harder way is to have an open mind on this particular matter, but the right thing to do is to hear from Canadians and make sure their values align with whatever reform we enact as a House. That's what I have been tasked to do along with the support of all of you, and I hope we all take full advantage of this opportunity.

• (1450)

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, you have about a minute left.

Mr. David Christopherson: Very good. Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister. I appreciate what you said, and thank you for your personal remarks. I have to say that it's still not clear to me. Again, the Prime Minister is not just anybody. Let's remember that past presidents of the United States have said that they would give anything to have the power of a Canadian Prime Minister with a majority government. So what the Prime Minister says matters a lot.

You just hired somebody in the PCO who clearly, publicly, favours the alternate vote system, so it's kind of hard to accept that you really are open to something different when we can point out evidence that you're doing everything you can to try to stack the outcome. Could you take another crack at it for me, please, and see if you can convince me?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Thank you for providing another opportunity for me to address that other part of your question.

I believe Derek is in the room somewhere. I can assure you that as a member of the Privy Council Office, a member of Canada's public service, providing independent, non-partisan advice to the government.... Neither the Prime Minister nor I have been involved in the hiring of individuals who work with the Privy Council Office. That independent, non-partisan advice is something that we can all be really proud of having at our disposal.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

We will continue with Mr. Thériault, who has six and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the minister for this enlightening meeting.

As the members of the committee know, I have been worried since we started our work. Over a four-year period in Quebec, I lived through an attempt at electoral reform that involved changing the voting the system. I am concerned by our operating methods.

I was looking at the votes today. The Privy Council will have \$10.7 million over four years, with \$8 million for this year. However, the committee has just \$300,000 to consult all Canadians. It seems to me that there is an imbalance and that a parallel process is being set up.

You have submitted a guide today. What will this money be used for? Don't you feel a certain lack of legitimacy in the fact that the committee, regardless of the members' party, is in charge of consulting Canadians, but that you are getting so much money to do parallel work, even though we don't even know what this is about? Transparency is lacking here. At the same time, why aren't we getting as much money to do work that is a lot more extensive and important in the short timeframe you are giving us?

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I would like to thank the honourable member for his question. It is an important one. More importantly, I'd like to express my gratitude in seeing him at this table. He has welcome knowledge to bring to this conversation, and we will all benefit from it.

Now, we have received \$10.7 million, over the next four years, to conduct outreach to Canadians across this country. I have expressed that there will be a parallel process happening. As you reach out to Canadians across this country, Mark Holland and I will be doing the same. Our approach will be about reaching out to those regions and those peoples I mentioned who aren't traditionally engaged in the process. That's how the funds will be used.

As far as the budget and the resources allotted to this particular group are concerned, as you are well aware it is a decision not made by me but by the Board of Internal Economy. The hope is that the resources that have been provided will allow you to do an extensive and meaningful engagement process with Canadians. If the resources are not sufficient, if you believe you need more to do more, to be more effective, so that you can arrive at some sort of a consensus by December 1, then I urge you to connect with your chair, who can then connect with the Board of Internal Economy. If you need more funds to do this work, I can assure you that I support your doing so.

• (1455)

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Thériault: It is even more disturbing, if I may say so, that you are ruling out a public consultation from the outset. You said earlier that this was a voters' reform and that it belonged to them. Here is my interpretation of your comments. This is not a debate of politicians, experts or insiders. These issues have to be resolved by Canadians instead.

You said in your presentation that there was no perfect system.

But in these conditions, to avoid our deliberations being tainted by partisanship, why not show your willingness to change things by making a commitment to letting the Canadian people speak to the advantages and disadvantages of various models?

Is it because you are not sure you will succeed? I think that something needs to be done. It seems that the objective is a new voting system for the next election. That is one of the elements of an electoral reform.

Why not commit to this right now?

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Thank you.

We committed to this past election being the last one conducted under first past the post for a reason. It's what we heard Canadians say or request they need during the consultation process that the Prime Minister took upon himself, over several years, to put in place to hear from Canadians. Canadians asked us to reform the way we vote, so we are simply committing and staying committed to a promise that we made.

Where I disagree with the honourable member is on the premise of his question. We do want to hear from Canadians. We do want a debate within communities across this country about what system they'd like us to implement. The difference between how this may have been done by other folks at other times and us, we hope, is that we need to have a debate about values, the particular values that inform us as to which system Canadians find most suitable. We want it to be a legitimate system, we want it to be an inclusive one, we want it to be accessible, and we would like to maintain that connection to local representation.

This guide that you have referred to a few times in your remarks, the work that you will be doing, the work that Mark Holland and I will be doing, and various social media channels, will all be used to inform our decision. And also, you have been asked as a committee, by the motion adopted by the House, to come up with various ways of hearing from Canadians. I look forward to all the ideas you may have.

The Chair: Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Madam Minister.

In the time I have I want to start by publicly thanking the government for making the commitment that was in the Liberal platform part of the Speech from the Throne, and for saying more clearly in the Speech from the Throne what wasn't said in the platform, which is this: "To make sure every vote counts...2015 will be the last federal election conducted under the first-past-the-post voting system." I'll put on the record that I intend to hold you to the promise. I think this is the one chance in a generation to get fairer voting in Canada—and it isn't that we haven't tried before.

I have a few little historical factoids before I ask you a question. The first parliamentary committee to take up a study of proportional representation to replace first past the post was in 1921, and there was another in 1937. Our system of voting wasn't designed for 19th century Canada; it was invented when people thought the earth was flat. I would also add one more change made by Parliament that I think is even more fundamental to how we voted, which was in 1970 when, for the first time ever, the identity of the candidate became subservient to the name of their party. In the 1970s the first elections were held in which the name of the party was next to the name of the candidate on ballots.

I would note one quick thing. In my own riding, I've already done a survey of every household, and 82.4% of the Saanich-Gulf Islands residents who reported in the survey want proportional representation. That said—and here ends the thank yous—we have a problem, and that is the legitimacy of the process we undertake. There is more in our current media attacking the process to get rid of a perverse voting system than there is on why we need to replace it in the first place. Moreover, the legitimacy of the process is undercut by the very point my friend Mr. Christopherson made, which is that to do the right thing here may mean that a majority government of Liberals choose a voting system that goes against their self-interest. That tends to make people's cynicism rise above their willingness to suspend disbelief. I'm on the side of suspending disbelief. I'm on the side of getting a fair voting system out of this group of 11 MPs who can vote, and our chair.

I'd like you to give us your word—and people may think the word of a politician doesn't mean much, but I have a lot of respect for this minister—that you will fight for whatever this committee recommends when it comes time to take a report to cabinet?

● (1500)

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I'd like to express my appreciation to the honourable member at this table, who has the ability to participate fully and meaningfully. The fact that we are around this table and that this committee is unlike any other committee in the House of Commons right now, I hope is a reminder that this government is committed to doing things differently. We're open to listening to Canadians and to taking into account the recommendations and the feedback we receive from other parties. The fact that we're here in this room should be a constant living reminder that we are open to ideas and serving the best interests of Canadians.

I am committed to working alongside you, to hear from Canadians about the values they want to see reflected in their electoral system. I am committed to reviewing the report that you thoughtfully put together for our deliberations, and to bring forward to the House of Commons a recommendation that makes sense for all of us.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Can I take it from that, Madam Minister, that our report will be something you will support if you find that we have legitimately consulted with Canadians to the best of our ability?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Please repeat your question, Madam May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Will you support the report's recommendations if you're satisfied that the work we've done reflects a good faith effort to listen to Canadians?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I am looking forward to reading the report and making an informed decision once I've received it. As eager as we are for this work to arrive at a conclusion, I think it's important to allow this process to unfold.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I think I have two minutes left, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to now ask you questions that have come in through Twitter. Larry Pardy in Amherst, Nova Scotia, wants to know if our committee will be holding hearings in remote northern ridings, those most adversely impacted by proposals that might enlarge riding sizes.

I know this is usually a question for the committee, but since you're here, what is your view on our getting to more remote northern ridings?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: First, Mr. Chair, I would like to commend this committee for opening this conversation to Canadians who do not have the privilege of being in this room. I think it was very progressive and very thoughtful of you to allow for this channel and I thank Larry from Nova Scotia for his question.

Through you, Mr. Chair, Larry, we have asked this committee to focus on groups that will be affected by the reforms that we put forward in a unique way and that includes those living in rural and remote regions. Mark Holland and I will be reaching out to Canadians who belong to these communities specifically and I urge this committee to do the same. There are a lot of creative, thoughtful ways to meaningfully engage Canadians. You've opened the floodgates, which is great, and those ideas will continue to pour in.

Ms. Elizabeth May: One last question from Twitter for the minister is from Sam Nabi in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario. This is a really good one. How can we ensure truth in advertising through the consultation process?

I would just say parenthetically that in the campaign referendum on single transferable vote in B.C. in the spring of 2009 a lot of things were said about the single transferable vote that were simply not true and it was hard to confront that. It always favours the status quo. How do we ensure truth in advertising?

● (1505)

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Well, thank you, Sam, from Kitchener, for engaging in this process. The awareness campaign that needs to take place so that all Canadians are aware that this engagement process is happening, that they have opportunities to be part of it where the various conversations are happening, needs to be done in a non-partisan way. This is a commitment that was made by our government. It's a commitment that we had delivered upon by outlining various recommendations and guidelines for doing so.

I am counting on the good work of our free and independent press to ensure that as many Canadians as possible know what's going on with this process as it unfolds.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go back now to the Liberal Party with Mr. DeCoursey for six and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Matt DeCoursey (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for joining us today. I also want to thank you for your dedication in addressing this matter and for the work you are doing to ensure that each and every Canadian can have their say in their Parliament and their government.

[*English*]

Also, *Eid Mubarak* to you, your family, and certainly to the people celebrating in Fredericton, whom I wish I could be with this evening.

While I have the chance, Ms. May, I'll address Larry's question by assuring him that as the Atlantic representative on this committee, I'll be reaching out to my colleague Bill Casey to ensure that he hosts a town hall consultation in that region, which does lead me to my question.

Madam Minister, the town halls that all MPs have been asked to conduct I see as an important part of this process, an important way of ensuring that not just the perspectives of experts but the testimony of all Canadians is heard. In your conversations with parliamentarians, how do you foresee these MP town halls proceeding? Is there a level of interest? In your conversations with Canadians, how have they impressed upon you the importance of these town halls?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I thank my honourable colleague for committing to spending his summer, along with other colleagues, on this work and for “voluntelling” Mr. Casey to do his own town hall.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Maryam Monsef: What I've heard from members across parties, as well as senators, is how eager they are to be part of this conversation, to facilitate these conversations. They are looking forward to all of the ways that you will support them in reaching out to their constituents and to hosting these town halls. There are some who find it sufficient to host one. There are some, like one of my honourable colleagues, who's going to hold 17 town halls on various topics, including electoral reform. They see it not just as a means to an end of arriving at a solution to present to government, but also as important community-building opportunities, as I've certainly seen these conversations can be across this nation.

Besides parliamentarians, I've heard from others that they too want to be part of this conversation. I refer to grade 5 students and high school students. I've heard from college and university students. I've heard from church groups. I've heard from various book clubs that they want to host their own town hall type of conversations. They are eager to get started this summer, around kitchen tables, around barbeques, in their own community centres.

I'll take this opportunity to refer back to the dialogue guide. This particular guide has several components: first is a backgrounder. The conversation around electoral reform can be an intimidating conversation. What this guide provides is information that will bring folks up to speed on the opportunity we have.

This particular dialogue guide is meant to provide not just MPs but any Canadian with a step-by-step guide on how to go about promoting an event like this; how to go about formatting it and facilitating it; and most importantly, about how to report to this committee what they're hearing from people in their communities. You'll see on the final page a reference and contact information that allows folks to provide that feedback to you. I'm really looking forward to what MPs come up with. I certainly will extend an invitation to any of you around this table that if you think that having Mark Holland or me in your riding would be helpful in any way, to please reach out to me and we will do our best to make it out to your

particular riding. But there are many other ways, beyond MPs' taking the lead, that we have outlined in this guide. I hope that Canadians will take advantage of this opportunity.

• (1510)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: I am also looking forward to seeing all Canadians participate in this dialogue.

[*English*]

While these consultations are taking taking, with MPs hosting town halls and Canadians using the tool kit—and I assume it's amenable to being used by different demographics, including the young and old in different areas—what process will you and the parliamentary secretary be undertaking and how will you be keeping attuned of the consultation process taking place across the country?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: This is certainly a guide that's meant to be accessible and inclusive. It's not meant to be prescriptive. It's meant to serve as an invitation into a complex but really important conversation that we know that many Canadians, regardless of age or background, want to be a part of. While this work is happening in communities across the country, what we envision is that each of you will be reaching out to Canadians from coast to coast to coast, in the unique way that you will do so, in a way that encourages engagement from those groups that are traditionally not engaged or included in this process.

Mark Holland and I will be conducting our own tour of the country, making sure that we are staying connected with Canadians, that we're hearing from them on what values and what priorities they have for their electoral reform so that come December 1, when you provide your report to us, we have also heard from Canadians and we can make sure that the most thoughtful recommendations are put on the table in the House of Commons for us to then deliberate upon further.

I just want to outline that the most important aspect of this is being creative and recognizing that in 21st century Canada there are lots of ways we can reach out to communities across the country. Some may be hosting town halls in person. Some may be doing them on the phone. I know that some people will be knocking on doors. That's what we'd like to see. A diverse country deserves a multi-channel conversation on its electoral reform.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Deltell.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Chair, esteemed colleagues, Minister, I'm happy to be joining you on this beautiful July day.

Mr. Chair, the minister made some statements earlier that we feel are questionable.

[*English*]

She said that a referendum is an “incomplete picture”.

[*Translation*]

In other words, a referendum would not provide an overall picture of the situation.

Through the exercise we are asked to do in our ridings, we will reach 50,000 or 60,000 Canadians, at best. That's a lot of people and it has never been seen before. That said, will those 50,000 or 60,000 Canadians help us paint a comprehensive portrait? Wouldn't the 17,559,353 individuals who voted in the last election rather be able to really help us get an overall picture? For us, it is clear that a referendum, and not consultations such as the ones we will hold, would help paint an overall picture.

The minister is talking about conversations in various jurisdictions. Steps have already been taken in a number of provinces, so she is quite right. I am from Quebec, and I know what I am talking about. Any time a province wanted to make changes, it used the referendum to do so, whether we are talking about British Columbia, Ontario or Prince Edward Island. This brought one of the current government's senior ministers, the Honourable Stéphane Dion, to say the following:

Precedent makes holding a referendum necessary in Canada: changing the voting system would require popular support.

This was said by Stéphane Dion, one of your government's senior ministers.

The minister concluded with the following:

[English]

it's what Canadians said to us in the last campaign.

[Translation]

Really? Canadians told her that?

Maybe she should talk to her colleague from Hamilton-East—Stoney Creek, who said the following:

[English]

It's not something I've heard anything about on the campaign trail.... I don't recall one conversation at the door that had to do with that.

[Translation]

The same thing is happening in Quebec City as in Hamilton. No one has talked to me about that either. Coincidentally, I am going to Hamilton on vacation next week. I am sure that people will be as friendly there as they are in Quebec City.

We did not hear about this during the election campaign. The Liberal Party's election platform, which you are familiar with, Mr. Chair, contained 96 pages, but it had only three sentences about the electoral reform. And you are saying that it was an important issue? Come on!

My question for the minister is very simple; it's a referendum question. If there are changes, are you prepared to hold a referendum, yes or no?

•(1515)

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the honourable member for the contributions he'll be making on this committee and I'd like to take the opportunity to answer several components of his conversation just now.

It is true that we have seen more than one province explore the possibility of electoral reform. It is true that the provinces' referenda

have not changed the status quo. It is also true that half of the population in those provinces did not engage in the referenda. Now it may be okay for some people to not have 50% of the electorate engaged, but that is not good enough for me and that is not good enough for Canada. In 2016, surely there is a way to be more inclusive and to be more engaging with Canadians.

That said, while I have yet to be convinced that a referendum is the best way to go forward, I am counting on your deliberations and your recommendations in your report, which I look forward to reading come December 1 of this year, on the best way to go forward and to determine that broad support. This is not going to be easy work. This is very challenging work. You'll be sacrificing a lot to arrive at that final report. This is a diverse country, too.

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Mister—

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: What works in one province, what we hear in one province, does not dictate what we're going to hear from the rest of the country, which is why there is a committee reaching out to Canadians across this nation. I can assure you that in the 26 debates I participated in in Peterborough—Kawartha, electoral reform came up at every single one of those debates. We were clear in our party platform, which you referred to. I was here in Ottawa. It was June of 2015, and I stood shoulder to shoulder with other hopeful MPs, behind our now-Prime Minister, who made a commitment to deliver upon 32 commitments for a more open and transparent government. That included the idea of reforming the way senators are appointed. That included the ideas that we are exploring here around changing the way we vote. That includes mandatory voting and online voting.

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Mr. Chair—

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: We are not going to arrive at a conclusion. We're going to count on you to hear from Canadians and bring their voices into this conversation.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Deltell, go ahead.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Mr. Chair, my question was clear, but the least we can say is that the answer was not. I asked the minister to answer with a yes or no, but she answered me with a maybe, and I am even being generous using that term.

Here I am thinking of the answer you gave earlier to my colleague, when you said that you were not definitely excluding the holding of a referendum. If that is the case, Minister, could you tell me what steps you have taken so far in terms of amendments to be made to the Referendum Act and the changes you are making to Elections Canada to ensure that a referendum can be held on this key issue, which consists in changing the voting system?

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I'd like to remind all members that this is not a simple conversation. This is not going to boil down to a simple yes or no answer. This is not a black and white issue. To that end, you will not receive a simple black or white answer.

What have I done? I've been in constant communication with Elections Canada to ensure that we're on the right track. I have put forward a motion in the House to strike this committee, and then amended the motion to make sure that it's as inclusive as possible. I'm here today speaking with you about my priorities. I'm really looking forward to the conversation that you will have with Canadians and the recommendations that you provide me with about various aspects, including how to engage, whether or not we have that broad buy-in.

• (1520)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Fergus now.

Mr. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Minister, thank you very much for joining us today. I would like to wish *Eid Mubarak* to you, as well as to my Hull—Aylmer constituents who were celebrating that event today. I assume you are anxious to return to your riding to celebrate with your family. So I want to thank you once again for being here today.

My question is about principles, but before I ask it, I would like to extend an invitation that may interest our colleagues opposite. We will hold a public debate on the electoral reform in my riding of Hull—Aylmer. That fits well with the member debates I have been organizing since my election. We have already held three of them: one on the environment, another one on immigration and a third one on the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Hundreds of people attended those meetings. I assume and hope that you or your parliamentary secretary will be able to attend the one we will be holding next October. I expect hundreds of people from Hull and Aylmer to be there. I hope that one of my constituents, Mr. Deltell, will also be there. He will certainly be welcome.

Minister, my question is more about the five guiding principles you listed in your presentation that were part of the motion adopted by the House of Commons to create this committee. I would like to know why those principles are so important to you. Can you tell us in more detail what you think about the principles?

[*English*]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I thank my honourable colleague, and I am proud of him for hosting three town halls, and many more to go. I look forward to the possibility of being part of the conversation that his constituents will have on electoral reform in October—but I hope not too late in October because October 14, of course, is the deadline for MPs to send their reports from their town halls to this committee so that you may include them in your report.

I appreciate the question about why we have a set of guiding principles and why they're so important.

As we have seen over the past few months of this Parliament, and certainly further in the past, there is a diverse range of opinions on electoral reform out there. Certainly I've been connecting with various stakeholders, and current and former parliamentarians. Those groups I spoke of earlier looked at existing data, looked at what's happened in other jurisdictions in our country and around the

world, and believe it or not, there are areas where consensus is possible.

One of those areas is that for this conversation to occur effectively, to engage Canadians meaningfully, it needs to be anchored with a set of principles that we can relate to as Canadians and can then match with various existing systems. To do it the other way, to have a very technical conversation about the systems that exist and then try to find our values, as a nation, within them is much harder work and, I'd argue, not effective.

The reason we decided to take a principle-based approach is that this is the consensus in the literature, in other jurisdictions that had done so, and also what we heard from current and former parliamentarians.

I'm going to be talking about them, so I'm going to take a moment to remind folks of these principles, the first one being restoring the effectiveness and the legitimacy of our voting system by reducing the existing distortions, and strengthening the link between voter intention and electoral results; and encouraging greater engagement and participation in the democratic process, including fostering civility and consensus-building and a sense of social cohesion. So far these two, I hope, are principles that we all share.

We want a system that is perceived as and is legitimate. We want a system that encourages greater participation, which brings the voter turnout to a higher number. With the last election being the exception, youth voter turnout has been on a steady decline over the last 20 years. Surely we can do better. Surely we want more people participating, and that's what greater engagement, as a principle, is meant to focus on.

The third principle that the House adopted was supporting accessibility and inclusiveness for all eligible voters, and avoiding undue complexity in the voting process.

We have connected with many groups who have shared their concerns about the lack of accessibility that currently exists in the voting process. Fortunately, the leadership at Elections Canada has had the good sense to bring together a body made up of individuals, advocates with lived experience around accessibility issues, and is actively working to enhance accessibility.

• (1525)

The Chair: Excuse me, Minister, we have to go to Mr. Boulerice.

Our six and a half minutes for—

Hon. Maryam Monsef: In conclusion, principles matter.

The Chair: Yes.

Monsieur Boulerice.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to begin by wishing you, as well as to all our Muslim brothers and sisters from Quebec and the rest of Canada, *Eid Mubarak*—in other words, happy end of Ramadan.

I will take 10 seconds to continue to encourage people to use hashtag #ERRE to send us comments or questions on Twitter while we are in this meeting. We do look at the comments.

Minister, thank you for joining us. This historic opportunity to reform our voting system so as to make it much more reflective of the voters' will is very exciting for me.

As we know, the Conservative Party is in favour of the status quo, which is a system that creates significant distortions. For instance, your government was elected with 39% of the votes, but it accounts for 60% of the members in the House. There have even been times, in past elections, when the party with the most votes would lose the election, as it had obtained fewer seats, and that is completely unacceptable.

In the latest election, people sometimes had the impression that their vote was lost. It was actually more than an impression, as it turned out. The figures were analyzed by the Broadbent Institute. According to the figures, for each Liberal member elected, 40,000 votes were needed, while 70,000 votes were needed for the Conservatives, about 85,000 votes for the New Democrats and approximately 600,000 votes for the Green Party member. So I can understand that people are feeling frustrated, even angry.

At the NDP, we deeply believe that a Parliament should first and foremost reflect the diversity of opinions within society.

Jason Pugh, an individual who lives in Mr. DeCoursey's riding, asked on Twitter a few minutes ago whether we should adopt a system whereby a party with 30% of the votes would be allocated about 30% of the seats in the House.

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I thank the honourable member, firstly, for his remarks about Eid, and I'd like to point out that my parliamentary secretary, Mark Holland, fasted this Ramadan, so this is not a celebration just for Muslims or a practice shared by just Muslims, and I'm sure he's a stronger man for it.

We have come to this process with an open mind and we recognize that the current system, as much as it has served us well for 140 years, can be done better. Canadians have mandated us to review the alternative systems that are available. It's why we established a committee, it's why we're looking forward to hearing from all Canadians, including those on social media—and thank you, Jason, for your input in that regard—and it's why your work is so important. This is a historic opportunity before us to strengthen the way that we vote, to engage more people in this conversation, to be more inclusive, to be more accessible, to strengthen the connection between Canadians and their democratic institutions, and I'm looking forward to your contributions.

• (1530)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Do you agree with the principle whereby obtaining 30% of votes would translate to getting about 30% of House seats?

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: You are referring to the principle of proportionality?

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Yes.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I think it's an important one to discuss. The principles that were adopted by the House of Commons in the motion that has brought this committee forward are meant to act as a starting point. They are not the only values that we expect you to explore with Canadians, but merely a beginning, a starting point for a conversation, rather than an inclusion. And under the first principle that we've set forward, we have asked that you consider a system that reduces distortion and strengthens the link between voter intention and the election of representatives.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Minister, you have accepted the NDP's proposal to expand this committee in order to include parties that are not normally represented and make sure that it does not include a majority of Liberal members. The next question is about what happens next.

Can we get a commitment from you that the Liberal Party will not act alone and that, to do so, it will have to get the support of at least another political party in the House of Commons? We would like this electoral reform not to be a purely Liberal one.

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: We changed the membership of this particular committee, not just because we heard from parliamentarians, but because we heard from Canadians. I hope that continues to demonstrate our openness in this process. I'd like to remind you that members from all parties have committed at some point or another to change the way we vote. In 2002, the member for Calgary Midnapore proclaimed his support for a segment of an NDP opposition day motion, declaring that he wholeheartedly agreed with the NDP on developing a policy that supports electoral reform to some more proportionate system of representation and of parliamentary reform. The member—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I have about 45 seconds left, and I wanted to use this time to ask you a question.

I am worried that we ultimately won't have enough time to implement a serious reform by 2019. You have already said that this reform should receive widespread support.

Can you define that broad consensus you will need? Right now, it is very unclear.

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Broad support is something that we've asked you to hear from Canadians and to recommend to us the meaning of.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Boulerice.

Mr. Richards, you now have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair, and, Minister, thank you for being here.

I think, Mr. Chair, that the minister has been pretty clear that her personal opinion is prejudiced against a referendum. She's been, I think, far less clear on the government's position on respecting the will of Canadians in a referendum, if that's being demanded. I certainly would indicate that's what we're hearing out there. However, I'll give the minister a chance to clarify this one more time. I know she's indicated her aversion to a yes or no question, but I can assure you, Minister, this is a question that you can, and I think should, answer with a yes or no. If this committee recommends, after hearing from Canadians, holding a referendum, will you commit to doing so, yes or no?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I thank the honourable member for all the opportunities he's provided me to share my insight on this—

Mr. Blake Richards: An answer one time would be helpful.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: —and my opinion, as well as the government's approach. I will continue to remind him that it's not as simple as yes or no. If it was, we wouldn't need the support of the committee to hear from Canadians and to come to us with thoughtful recommendations. This is something that we've asked you to help us refine. I'm looking forward to the work that needs to be done and the recommendations that you put forward.

Mr. Blake Richards: What I'm asking though, Minister, is, I appreciate the committee's going to do its work, but what I'm asking you is, if this committee does its work, and is recommending holding a referendum, will you then commit to doing so, yes or no? It is a yes or no question, and I expect a yes or no answer, please.

• (1535)

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I'm tempted to call you Mr. Speaker, as I feel like we are back in question period.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Maryam Monsef: This is not a simple question. This is not a simple process. This is not something that my opinion alone or any individual's opinion alone can inform. To answer this question thoughtfully, to answer this question in a way that reflects the voices of Canadians across this country, not just my province, not just your province, but coast to coast to coast, requires a thoughtful and deliberate outreach effort that all of us are charged with. It requires getting creative. It requires using the technologies available to us in 2016 to ensure a wholesome and inclusive conversation that even those Canadians who don't traditionally engage in the electoral process can be a part of.

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: That is much more complex than the member opposite is proposing.

The Chair: Excuse me.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I think it's pretty clear why the minister is so opposed to referendums. She just simply can't answer a yes or no question.

I think, Mr. Chair, what I'd like to do instead is to move back to the line of questioning that Mr. Reid had been pursuing before he ran out of time.

I think it's clear that the minister has a personal aversion to referendums, and that's fine. But we have to ensure that this process is about what all Canadians have to say. If Canadians are demanding a referendum, they should have the opportunity to have one.

To ensure that a referendum can even be an option at the end of this process, there must be steps taken now to ensure that any necessary legislation or processes are put in place to enable that. What I'd like to ask the minister is whether you and your department are taking the steps required to ensure that proper enabling legislation is in place or updated now so that a referendum can be held on your final proposal to change the voting system. This must be done now, not after the process, so are there steps being taken? Are you doing anything now to ensure that there is proper legislation in place to enable that at the end of the process?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, it's really important that this conversation be done not just by hearing from experts and academics, the usual suspects, but from everyday Canadians as well. Tomorrow you'll be hearing from chief electoral officers, past and present.

As we learned from previous practices—for example, when the former government enacted legislation that affected the work of Elections Canada—we cannot do this work without making sure that we take into account the capacity and the limits that Elections Canada will face in implementing the changes we put forward. Unlike the former government, we are continuing conversations with them. The Chief Electoral Officer has reassured the procedure and House affairs committee, I believe, as well as me that there is enough time for these options on the table to be enacted, including any legislation that needs to change.

The Chair: Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Let me just ask the minister this. One of her colleagues, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, wrote the following in 2012: “Precedent makes holding a referendum necessary in Canada: changing the voting system would require popular support.” Also in 2012, there was a Liberal Party of Canada policy process on democracy and good governance. The summary document about electoral reform indicated that “it is also suggested that electoral reform should follow a referendum.”

So it's pretty clear that in the past, Liberal colleagues of hers, including party members in a policy process engagement, were very clear that a referendum would need to be held, and there would need to be work done, obviously, to ensure the referendum could be held.

I will ask the minister again, and I'll give her one more chance to answer the question. She keeps talking about the question being answered over and over. Well, yes it is, but we're not hearing the answer to the question. Hopefully this time we'll hear the answer.

If this process is completed, if Canadians have demanded a referendum...and I certainly would say that the polling is indicating that this is the case. But let's say the process is completed and the recommendation is made that a referendum must be held. Will you commit that you would then hold a referendum, yes or no?

The Chair: You have about 20 seconds, Minister.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: There is a diverse range of opinions, including from MPs like the member for Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, who has in the past said that his preference would be for the alternative ballot. I'm open to all opinions. Your job as a committee is to reach out to all Canadians and come to us with a report, with that final question: what is the best way to determine whether or not the recommended reform has the broad support of Canadians?

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

We will now move on to Mr. McGuinty.

You have six and a half minutes, Mr. McGuinty.

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, welcome.

[English]

Minister, *Eid Mubarak* to you and your family. I had the privilege this morning of attending two of the five mosques in my riding and meeting with 3,000 of my closest friends. It was a wonderful day.

Minister, I want to thank you for your thoughtfulness and your sincerity on this file in the face of so much cynicism and adversity. It's not easy bringing change to an existing order, and that's what we're trying to do as a government. I've felt for 12 years, since first being elected, that our responsibility here, and this committee's responsibility, is to try to enhance trust and drive up the credibility of both our democratic processes and our institutions.

I think that's in large part what this good-faith effort is trying to do at a time when, as you rightly pointed out, Minister, there are different demographics in the country with different voting propensities. For example, you said that younger voters vote less than older voters, newer Canadians vote less frequently than more established Canadians, and so on and so forth. So I want to thank you for your patience on this. As you rightly pointed out, to quote you back, this is “not easy work”, it's “very challenging work”.

I have a pointed question for you that I want to ask in terms of part of the mandate you have given to this committee. That is this question of mandatory and online voting. Can you give us a sense of why you're asking the committee to examine those two options, this notion of mandatory voting, which I believe is the case in Australia, and online voting, which may be the case in other countries?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Thank you very much—and well done with not one visit but two to celebrate this important day.

Mandatory voting has benefits. It has been known to increase voter participation. There are merits to that side of the argument. On the other hand, there are those who feel that implementing

mandatory voting may not address the core issue of voter apathy. Furthermore, how do we enforce mandatory voting? It's important for this committee to deliberate on both sides of the argument and to make a recommendation based on what you hear from Canadians.

As far as online voting goes, in the same spirit, for some Canadians online voting means greater accessibility. For some Canadians online voting may just be the preferred way of voting. Whether or not we go about online voting, it will be really important to make sure that the integrity and security of the process are intact.

It's important for us to consider these options.

Mr. David McGuinty: Minister, I couldn't help but notice that my three Conservative colleagues, one after the other, simply couldn't take yes for an answer. So thank you for clarifying your position on this question of a referendum—not ruling it in and not ruling it out—in fairness, and without prejudging the outcome of this work. But I want to go back to something Ms. May alluded to earlier, which is the propensity to create enormous conflict around this question in the media coverage. It's about characters in conflict, it's a great play, but it doesn't necessarily help Canadians understand why we're trying to make these changes.

Can you speak to this question again, going back to some of your good remarks? Leaving aside the process questions that Ms. May alluded to, why are you so passionate about this?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: You were right in your observation that I don't share the cynicism that may exist out there around this particular issue. I don't share that cynicism, because I, and all of you in this room, are a reminder of what is possible in this country. Through the various parties that have come before us over 149 years, we've seen great work happen in this place, and I'm humbled to be a part of this.

I understand that this is an enormous challenge, and have understood it more and more every day. But I also know that it's an enormous privilege for any one of us in this world of ours to have a say on how we are governed. We have the opportunity to put our name on the ballot, yes, but to have a say on how we are governed is a privilege that many around the world do not have. Here we are, a handful of parliamentarians, tasked with this grave privilege and responsibility to reach out to Canadians.

I know the appetite is there for this conversation. I know we have the tools available to us in 2016 to do this in a responsible and inclusive way. I know it's possible for all of us around this table, or rather all of you around this table, to come to a place of compromise. If we were able to change the very makeup of this committee tasked with this very important work, to break from tradition, then surely it is possible, despite what may have happened over the past 10 years, for this group of elected parliamentarians to come to a thoughtful conclusion. I'm really looking forward to doing something that very few Canadians will ever get to do, which is to connect with Canadians from coast to coast to coast, to look them in the eye and to hear from them what values and needs and aspirations they have for their democratic institutions.

• (1545)

Mr. David McGuinty: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McGuinty.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair. I didn't want to interrupt my friend, Mr. McGuinty, but I have a question about process that I would like to ask the minister.

Minister, part of the mandate of the committee here—

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, why is this a point of order?

Mr. David Christopherson: If you give me 30 seconds, Chair, it will be clear.

The Chair: You should address it to the chair, please.

Mr. David Christopherson: Sure.

I want to ask the minister about the issue of the report from Mr. Mayrand that comes to the procedure and House affairs committee, which I also sit on, where every year we deal with all the recommendations that he has for changes. I'm wondering who has the mandate, then, in the eyes of the government, to review those

changes. I've been there before. He's going to bring them in. Are we expecting both committees to do the same thing, Chair?

The Chair: I don't see that as a point of order. It's just a question that you could have asked the minister at any point in the deliberation. Perhaps we can get an answer for you in some way afterwards.

I would just like to thank the minister again for making herself available on this important day.

[*Translation*]

I also want to thank the committee members. We have actually covered the issue in many respects thanks to the collegiality we established over our two first meetings.

Thank you all very much.

[*English*]

Thank you, Minister, for launching these hearings. I think we're all excited about the work ahead. Thank you very much.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Thank you.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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