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Chair

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia

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•(1000)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)):
Good morning everyone.

Welcome, Mr. Mayrand. We, on the committee, were very eager to meet with you this morning. You have valuable insight that will help us make informed decisions.

[English]

We have with Mr. Mayrand today Stéphane Perrault, the deputy chief electoral officer, regulatory affairs, and Michel Roussel, deputy chief electoral officer.

[Translation]

Without further ado, I will now turn the floor over to you, Mr. Mayrand.

Mr. Marc Mayrand (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased to be here today with my officials to meet committee members during their study of viable alternative voting systems to replace the first-past-the-post system and their examination of mandatory voting and online voting.

I will keep my introductory remarks brief. I should point out that, as the Chief Electoral Officer, I perform the role of administering the Canada Elections Act and the Referendum Act, and organizing and overseeing the conduct of electoral events. This also includes administering the political financing provisions of the acts, monitoring compliance, and conducting appropriate public information campaigns.

When there is a readjustment of federal electoral boundaries, which normally takes place after every decennial census, my role is to support the independent commissions and implement the new boundaries set by those commissions.

Finally, after a general election, I submit to Parliament a report containing legislative amendments that, in my opinion, are desirable for better administration of the acts.

My next recommendations report will be submitted to the Speaker of the House of Commons in early fall. This report is typically referred to and examined by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, which is responsible for matters related to the election of members to the House of Commons.

My recommendations will include proposed amendments to the Canada Elections Act related to the voting process and the regulatory

regime. Adopting these amendments will be essential to improving the experience of voters and political entities, irrespective of the voting system in place for the next general election. In that regard, these recommendations are complementary to the work of this committee.

[English]

Given the nature of my mandate, I intend to support the work of this committee by highlighting the administrative aspect of operationalizing changes that the committee may study. This is particularly important given the very short time frame available to make changes to the voting system, if they are to be in place for the next general election.

I do not intend to address the pros and cons of various electoral systems. The committee will hear about this from its witnesses, including members of the academic community, and perhaps groups representing citizens, and citizens themselves. As I indicated at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in April when they appeared on my office's main estimates, legislation enacting a reform should be in place well in advance of the next election to allow for proper implementation. I note that the government has committed to having legislation in May 2017, which I am comfortable with. In this regard I would like to point out some key considerations related to the implementation of a new voting system.

First, some alternative voting models you may consider may well require a redistribution of electoral boundaries. The current legal framework does not allow for redistribution except after each decennial census, and the current boundaries are supposed to be in effect until 2023. Nor does it allow for multi-member seats or regional groupings. Should redistribution be required because of a change in our voting system, enabling legislation will need to be put in place. Under the current regime the last redistribution exercise took 26 months to fully complete, and that was based on the newly compressed timeline that was enacted in 2011. While there may be ways to further reduce the timeline, the redistribution process should continue to reflect the fundamental principles of independence and neutrality through the establishment of an independent commission and a mechanism for public consultations.

Second, the introduction of a new voting system may make it difficult to publish the outcome of the election on election night by completing the counting of ballots manually at voting sites, as is currently the case. Canadians are accustomed to learning the results of elections quickly, and any possible delay should be considered carefully by the committee. For example, some systems require either moving all ballot boxes to a central counting place, which carries risk and can take significant time given our geography, or more likely would require the introduction of electronic tabulation at all polling places to ensure the timely release of election results on election night.

• (1005)

Third, in looking at other voting systems the committee may wish to consider the possible impact on the current political financing regime.

Fourth, consideration should also be given to the preparation of electors and election officers. An extensive public education campaign would be needed to ensure that Canadians understand the new system, and can exercise both their right to be a candidate and their right to vote. This is an aspect that cannot be overlooked and has been critical in other countries that have changed their electoral system.

My mandate in this regard would need to be clarified. The recruitment and training of election officers would also be crucial to ensure proper administration of the new rules.

Let me now turn briefly to online voting and mandatory voting. It is undeniable that many Canadians would benefit from the introduction of online or Internet voting. Internet voting would remove barriers and make a vote more accessible for various groups such as voters with mobility challenges, including seniors, those with visual impairments, and Canadians abroad. That being said, caution is needed in moving forward to ensure that Canadians continue to have the same high level of trust in the integrity of their elections. In this regard we are not currently planning to offer online voting in 2019. However, Elections Canada would certainly welcome direction from this committee in terms of a desirable approach in moving forward with Internet voting.

In examining this issue, the committee should consider a number of aspects, including social acceptance and the challenges that online voting present for the integrity and secrecy of the vote. I would ask the committee to consider the scope of the introduction of online voting, which may include limiting its use to particular groups of electors who would benefit most from this option, such as those with disabilities or Canadians living abroad.

Finally, with respect to mandatory voting I will simply note that there is a relatively broad range of experiences internationally. Currently 23 countries have legislation providing for mandatory voting at the national level. While I take no position on the merits of mandatory voting, I would encourage the committee to pay attention to several considerations during its study, including the provision of a compliance mechanism through sanctions or positive incentives, whether or not there should be exceptions for certain groups of voters, and of course acceptance by Canadians.

In closing, Mr. Chair, I wish to assure you that I and members of my staff will be happy to assist the committee in looking at these matters, particularly the operational and implementation aspect of various options for reform that the committee is considering.

Mr. Chair, I appreciate the opportunity to address the committee today as you begin work on your important mandate to review options to ensure that Canadians are effectively represented in the House of Commons. This rare opportunity does not happen often in many democracies. I wish you well in your work and I look forward to the outcome of your deliberations.

My colleagues and I are now available to answer your questions.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Fellow members, we have an hour and 10 minutes. If my math is right, that should be enough time for two rounds of questions. Each member will have five minutes.

Is everyone in agreement?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

• (1010)

The Chair: Great. Every member will have two turns.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Wonderful. Thank you.

The Chair: We'll begin with Mr. Aldag.

[*English*]

Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.): Thank you so much for your presentation and for being here this morning.

I am particularly interested, in part because of my background in the public service, largely in communications.

Looking at some of the education and communications aspects of what would be involved in introducing a new system, on page 4 of your submission you talk about how critical it would be to have an extensive public education campaign. You note that your mandate in this regard would need to be clarified.

Could you expand on that, and what you would be looking for as far as clarification in that public education component?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Clearly, given the very substantive changes that may be recommended by the committee, I think voters would need to be well informed to understand the new system. Systems can become quite complicated at times and even if they are not, there will be changes. It's important that voters understand what those changes mean in terms of how they exercise their options to select their representative.

Experience shows that such education needs to start early. It's not enough to do it only during a campaign; it has to start much earlier than that. I would suggest at least a year before the election so, again, that there are no surprises when electors show up at the polls and are asked to mark their ballots under a format that is different from what they are used to.

Mr. John Aldag: When you indicate that your mandate needs to be clarified, is there an issue with your existing mandate, or would you simply be able to jump into that kind of public education piece?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: My current mandate limits my education role to those who are under 18, so I think that's a limitation. Of course, I can inform electors of how and where to vote, but I think given that changes are being contemplated, we maybe need more than simply explaining where and how to vote.

Mr. John Aldag: If you could remind me, is that a recent change? I don't know if that's always been the case or if that was something—

Mr. Marc Mayrand: That change was introduced in 2014.

Mr. John Aldag: It's good to understand what would be needed there because I agree as we get into a potentially more complex system than we currently have, having that education for public understanding is going to be critical so that people can take full advantage of what it is that we're trying to do.

You indicate on page 3 of your notes, where you're talking about the timelines, “the Government has committed to having legislation in place by May 2017, which I'm comfortable with.” I take from that statement that you're saying that if the legislation does indeed fall into place by May 2017, you and your office would be able to have a new system. Could you just give us a summary of what components you would see being included in that? For instance, does that include things like the education campaign?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Certainly. There are always various aspects to an election. The first one is the logistical aspect, procuring the material, developing the new procedures, the new training materials for poll officials who have no experience. No one in Canada has experience with an alternative system, so we're starting from a blank page there.

Beside these aspects, we also need to look at the infrastructure, the technology that will be required to be put in place; ensuring that we procure the hardware, the software, the services that are needed to support the delivery of the election; and, of course, the educational aspect of the election, which needs to be planned very early on.

Mr. John Aldag: On that point, if we were to look at things like some form of online voting or electronic voting, would the timeline of May 2017 include that kind of introduction, or would it be more of a status quo?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I have no plans to introduce online voting for 2019. I would need, certainly, very clear directions in that regard. I think there's still a lot of research to be done, and there are many considerations. That's what I would like to see the committee doing in its work, addressing some of the key considerations and giving us some direction on where we should go and how should we proceed to explore and test online voting at some point. I doubt very much that this could be done by 2019, given the scope of the reform we're looking at. I think that would be a significant burden on capacity.

• (1015)

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to go to the Conservatives now, and Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Mayrand, for appearing here. I was very much saddened to learn that you will be leaving us, retiring at the end of this year, so let me just start by saying, having served on the committee that oversees you, the procedure and House affairs committee, for the past several years, what a pleasure it has been to work with you and how much I've been impressed by your sense of professionalism throughout that period.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Thank you.

Mr. Scott Reid: I wanted to start by turning to your comments, the ones that Mr. Aldag just referred to, “the Government has committed to having legislation in place by May 2017, which I'm comfortable with”. My understanding is actually that the government has committed to introducing legislation within 18 months, which is to say by April 2017, and has actually not committed to having legislation in place. This would mean through the House and through the Senate and given royal assent by May 2017. There is a point somewhere after May 2017, and I don't know what that date would be, where from your point of view it becomes impossible to implement any new system that involves a redistribution and maybe other considerations. What is the drop-dead date? May 2017 you pulled out for other reasons, but I don't think it accurately reflects where the government said it was going in its throne speech.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: We may have a different understanding of the government view on that, but as I indicated before, we need at least two years before the general election. Again, this is somewhat hypothetical because I don't know which system will be put forward at this point. As details come through, as the calendar gets a little bit clearer, I'll be able to come back to the committee and indicate the challenges we're facing and the feasibility of doing what we are being asked to do.

Mr. Scott Reid: That would be very reasonable. Thank you, I appreciate that.

Let me turn to another issue that has come up regarding timing. On April 21 of this year you informed the procedure and House affairs committee, in response to a question I placed, that Elections Canada would require a minimum of six months to prepare a referendum. I wanted to reconfirm, first of all, that you still regard six months as an accurate length of time you would need, and then to ask when the clock starts running on those six months. Is it triggered by a formal message from the Government of Canada that they intend to hold a referendum or is there some other point from which you are counting those six months?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Of course, the official trigger is a proclamation. Normally, there would be a discussion in the House regarding the question. That would be an early indication for us. Again, as we've done over the years, we constantly monitor the environment to try to estimate or assess the likelihood of a referendum and decide what efforts we should be putting into preparing for one. The six months is under the current Referendum Act.

That's the only assumption I can make at this point. Again, we live in a period of uncertainty in this regard, so I can't pinpoint precisely when we would start the six months. I can confirm with the committee that we've started to develop contingency plans, trying to identify what would need to be done. A referendum hasn't been held since 1992, as you know. We've started to identify work that need to be pursued to— There's no procurement; there are no activities in that regard. These things take time.

Mr. Scott Reid: Would you be comfortable at some point sharing those plans with us? It could be in the form of a written document sent to us during hearings specifically.

• (1020)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I can share with the committee what running a referendum entails for Elections Canada.

Mr. Scott Reid: That would be enormously helpful.

Thank you.

The Chair: We go now to the NDP.

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mr. Boulerice.

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

Mr. Mayrand, gentlemen, thank you for joining us today.

We, in the NDP, have always been in favour of changing the voting system, so we were very glad when this committee was finally created. We are also very glad that we managed to change the committee's makeup, although it did take a while for the committee to get down to work. Today, we are seeing the effects of that delay.

You said that, under the current regime, the redistribution exercise normally takes at least 26 months, when it's done after the census to take into account demographic changes and the like.

In this case, however, we are dealing with much broader and more comprehensive changes to the voting system. Let's say we opted for a mixed system, similar to that in Germany, where people have to cast votes on two separate ballots and a list system is used. If regional or provincial compensatory measures were needed, would the current 26-month time frame you mentioned be too short?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: If we go by the last electoral boundary redistribution, which wasn't all that long ago, the exercise should take between 24 and 26 months. That's how long it took the last time. Keep in mind that, back then, 30 ridings were added and, as a result, the commissions asked for time extensions, which were allowed under the act.

Without a fairly detailed scenario, it's hard for me to say whether it would take 22, 24 or 26 months. I would be misleading you if I were to give you an answer.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: It's just that the 26 months takes us to August 2017. That's soon.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes, just in time for the election. They're fairly tight time frames. Bear in mind that the last redistribution was based on a timeline that had been compressed under the act just before the redistribution process began.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: There is another issue I'd like to discuss.

The current first-past-the-post system leads to fairly significant distortions between the percentage of votes cast and the percentages of party seat counts. We've even seen the party with the most votes in the country losing the election, and that, in and of itself, makes no sense.

Many Canadians feel their vote doesn't matter and wonder why they should bother voting. They assume that either the Liberal or the Conservative candidate will win in their riding. There's no way to apply a compensatory measure to an individual's ballot in order to achieve more proportional representation.

Would you say that hinders voter turnout? Do you think that might deter voters who believe their vote won't matter?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: After every election, we study voter turnout. In fact, I can make those studies available to the committee, if you'd like. We examine the circumstances of those who did not vote in an effort to understand why they decided not to. Three broad categories usually emerge.

First, about 40% of people tell us they didn't vote owing to various barriers. They weren't available, they weren't in their riding and couldn't make it to the appropriate location to vote that day, and so forth.

Second, 45% of people tell us they don't care about politics. They don't think their vote will necessarily count.

Third, about 8% of people report not voting for procedural reasons, such as the complexity of the voter registration process.

These are longitudinal studies that are published, so they are available.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you.

Do I have any time left?

• (1025)

The Chair: You still have about 45 seconds.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Over the past 30 years, many western jurisdictions have changed their voting systems. In some cases, they were countries, such as New Zealand, and in other cases, they were regional parliaments, such as in Scotland and Wales.

Are you aware of any countries comparable to Canada, in terms of size and tradition, that replaced their voting system with the first-past-the-post system?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Not to my knowledge, but I'm not claiming to be familiar with every voting system in the world. I wouldn't be surprised if there were new democracies that had opted for the first-past-the-post system.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: You said new democracies, but their traditions wouldn't necessarily be comparable to Canada's.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

It's now over to Mr. Thériault.

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

Mr. Mayrand, Mr. Roussel, and Mr. Perrault, welcome to the committee. Thank you for providing a document with such clear information. It basically summarizes the concerns you have from a technical standpoint, concerns I share.

My question has two parts. First, I'd like you to elaborate on the political financing regime.

The government wants to put a new voting system in place. Some of those here already have a preference for a mixed member proportional system to improve representation and the plurality of votes of the various parties. Government financing doesn't exist currently.

In light of the Figueroa decision, do you not think it would be a serious injustice if we didn't restore the capacity of political parties to assert their voice in time for the next election? Do you not think we would be failing to ensure all parties enjoyed a minimum level of fairness at the starting gate, as far as the democratic process was concerned?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I believe political financing falls under the authority of various committees and Parliament, itself. Many debates on the subject have taken place over the years. The point I was trying to make was the importance of keeping in mind that changing the system would likely have repercussions on the organization of political parties, by riding and by region, perhaps, and that the regime wasn't adapted to such changes. It will be important to determine those potential repercussions.

For example, will it be necessary to revise the spending limits? Under the proposed system, the answer could be yes or no. I think those factors need to be considered. If there are candidates on the lists, how are they going to campaign? What type of campaign will they run? What spending limits will they be subject to? Will they be different from those imposed on the parties? Those are the kinds of questions that will need to be considered, in my view.

Mr. Luc Thériault: You said you hoped the committee would provide you with clear direction when it came to online voting. I'd like you to elaborate on that.

What kinds of problems do you anticipate, as compared with traditional voting? Casting a vote is a solemn event that usually takes place behind a voting screen. In that sense, is Internet voting problematic in your mind? Have you given it some thought?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It's quite a debate. I'd be glad to provide the committee with our studies on the subject. Technology changes

quickly, but a few years ago, we did conduct some rather in-depth studies on the issues associated with online voting.

That said, I think it's important to take into account considerations such as social acceptability, security, and vulnerability, of course. Eventually, it will be necessary to set the parameters. One of the things that will have to be determined is whether online voting can take place at any computer or whether the process has to be supervised. Currently, voting is supervised. Certain details will need to be examined, so it may be useful to start defining those issues.

As I mentioned, our regime already allows for voting by mail, so that's an unsupervised method of voting. It's important to examine whether the risks associated with online voting are greater than with voting by mail and whether those risks can be mitigated. Those are the kinds of issues I would like some direction on.

In Canada right now, municipalities are making a lot of headway when it comes to online voting, but that isn't the case at the provincial or federal levels. Although studies have been done, no new initiatives have really emerged. It's a question that's been pushed into the public domain, and I think everyone is waiting for some guidance before moving forward in a particular direction and actually piloting an online voting system. I think we can all agree it isn't necessary to have a universal approach from day one.

• (1030)

Mr. Luc Thériault: Beyond the decorum and secret ballot considerations—

The Chair: Mr. Thériault, it's now Ms. May's turn.

Mr. Luc Thériault: Mr. Chair, would you mind letting us know when we have a minute left? That would be helpful.

The Chair: Yes, if I'm able to.

Mr. Luc Thériault: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Mayrand, I also would like to begin by thanking you for your service to Canada over so many years, and I share with Mr. Reid regret on your decision to leave your post at the end of this year. My questions are in light of your experience and your dedication to democracy.

The first question picks up on a point that you made just a moment ago in response to Mr. Aldag. On the changes that were made in the former Bill C-23, the Fair Elections Act, you pointed to one that limits your role in education. Am I inferring too much in that, as I recall, in Bill C-23 there was a very tight timeline between when an election happened and when staff could be hired and trained? I would see that as another barrier here. Could you provide us either now or later with a complete list of the things that need to be changed under the current Canada Elections Act to ensure that a new electoral system could be rolled out and you and your office could perform the role of training and education both for the staff of Elections Canada and for the public?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I think you will find that in my report that will be released probably at the end of September. It will contain a number of recommendations that I think are needed to modernize our system, improve service to electors, and provide some flexibility to Elections Canada, to returning officers, to be able to adapt the service offered to the particular environment in which we have to conduct the election. You will see a series of recommendations coming this fall.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you.

The other question is about a consideration that I hadn't thought of as being particularly significant in changing voting systems, and that's your second point on learning the results of the election quickly. I do know that in New Zealand on their first occasion of using mixed member proportional, having voted for that system, and wanting that system, and having a high degree of civic literacy around the question, New Zealanders were still surprised that it was some time before the parties figured out for themselves how they would govern, and what coalition they would form. The question to you is, are you speaking to how long it takes to count the ballots, or how long it takes the parties themselves to know how they're going to put together a coalition in the case that no one party has a majority?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I'm speaking as the administrator of the election. It's the time required to count the ballots, depending on the system, again I don't want to generalize but subject to the system. You can look at what's currently happening in Australia where there are significant delays in computing, counting, the ballots. One of the main reasons there is that the contests are so close that in their preferential ballot system you have to allocate preferences and that requires several passes at the count.

Ms. Elizabeth May: That reminds me of the infamous 2000 election where the first past the post system south of the border ran afoul of butterfly ballots. I take your point, it's worth making sure we consider that.

Following up on the logistics questions for Mr. Reid, I wondered if there's a ballpark figure for what it costs the Canadian government to run a one-off referendum, not attached to a general election.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Again, we have limited experience, the last one being in 1992. Our estimate is that under the current Referendum Act it would be around \$300 million to run a referendum.

Ms. Elizabeth May: As you've mentioned many times, there are a lot of different systems that would qualify for proportional representation systems. Some might not require redrawing any riding boundaries, some might. If you group together existing electoral districts and draw a line around some that already exist, is that a relatively simple exercise?

• (1035)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It could be a simple exercise, and again that's speculative, but there may be a few, right? You still have to draw those lines and you still have to consider community of interest, geography, and all the factors that the commission needs to hear. I'm sure it will generate some debate, so I believe public consultation should happen on those regional groupings. It may be possible to accelerate the process, by how much I'm not in a position

to say right now. We may save a few months, but we're not going to cut it down from 24 to three months, I doubt it very much.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go back to the Liberals now, Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Mayrand, for being here today. It's nice to see you again.

One of the mandates that has been given to this committee is accessibility and inclusiveness. I was happy to know that in 2007, even after significant pressure from the Conservatives, you didn't alter the voting procedure to require Muslim women to remove their veil before voting. What changes can we make to the Canada Elections Act to ensure that we are inclusive and that we respect all the diversity that we have in Canada?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: We need to look at various barriers. If you want to make a fundamental difference in accessibility, and that's why I mentioned it earlier, you need to seriously look at online voting. Because various groups are facing barriers—and again I'm not denying the digital divide, we need to address that of course—if you look at the disabled community, we have 3.5 million electors who suffer various degrees of disability in this country. Technology would allow most of them to vote secretly and independently, which is the main objective that these groups have. If we really want to make a breakthrough, I would suggest exploring online voting more aggressively and how we make it an option for these electors.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Okay.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: There may be other things that we can do here and there, I'm not suggesting there's nothing else, but most of the other things will be quite incremental and not necessarily make a major difference. That's on the side of the electors. On the side of political parties and their representation in all these things, there are also suggestions that could be considered in terms of making the candidate lists more representative and more diverse in representing our society.

You will see in my recommendation report—I think this is Parliament, I can share that with you—I will be making a recommendation to allow reimbursement of expenditures by parties or campaigns for making their information more accessible. Again, Parliament will decide whether that's appropriate or suitable, but that's certainly one issue that has been raised.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You mean in order to become a candidate?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: There will be aspects in order to become a candidate, but also in order to reach out.

Much of the campaign information is not available in formats that are accessible to those who have a disability, so we will be putting a recommendation forward to propose that we consider reimbursing expenditures to campaigns that invest in making their information available in multiple, accessible formats. This is a small thing that we can do here and there, along with really taking a hard look at online voting.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I think that's good motivation for most of the parties, to make sure that we have all that information available.

You're thinking the main barrier that people face is accessibility and, although you have stated that for this next election you're not prepared at this point to do it, that this committee should seriously take a look at giving you more direction on online voting—

• (1040)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: —and, by May 2017, you have an adequate time at least for electoral reform as far as changing the voting process is concerned. I'm happy to hear that because it gives us some incentive and direction as to what we can do within that time, and I think we can make some good recommendations, good changes.

You talked a lot about security and social acceptability. I think the world is starting to move toward finding it socially acceptable to do things online. People make million dollar deals online and transfer money all the time, so it's hard for me to understand why we can't figure out a secure way to vote online. I think people would come on board since it would open it up to so many more people.

The Chair: Unfortunately, we'll have to go to the next question, but it's a good thought, and we can pick up on it in a bit.

[Translation]

It is now over to Mr. Deltell.

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I get to my question, I'd like to take a moment to remember J.-Jacques Samson, a prominent and influential political reporter in Quebec for the past 40 years. He was active in the municipal, provincial and federal arenas. As an accomplished, respected, and trusted journalist, he had an impact on people. On behalf of all of my colleagues, I would like to extend my sympathies to J.-Jacques's family.

My humble respects, Mr. Mayrand. It's a pleasure to meet you, as well as Mr. Perrault and Mr. Roussel. Through you, I would also like to acknowledge the thousands of Canadians who, every four years or, rather, whenever an election is called, work so diligently and methodically under tremendous pressure given that time is of the essence. We often forget that it is thanks to thousands of Canadians that we enjoy a viable, acceptable, and effective democracy. More specifically, I'd like to commend, if I may, the returning officer for the Louis-Saint-Laurent riding, Hélène Dion, and her team.

Mr. Mayrand, in response to my Bloc Québécois colleague's question about online voting, you mentioned the need for a certain level of social acceptability.

Do you think changing the voting system requires some social acceptability?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I believe so. If we want Canadians to have confidence in the electoral system, we need to make sure it's one they accept.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: How do you think we can achieve the social acceptability you speak of as we make changes to the voting system?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I will let you and the rest of parliamentarians, our elected representatives, make that decision.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Earlier you said that it would take at least 26 months to make the changes or, rather, that 26 months was an acceptable time frame in which to make the eventual changes. Is that correct?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Twenty-six months is how long the last redistribution of electoral boundaries took. What I said before and would like to make clear here again today is that, if the appropriate legislation is in place by May 2017—as was my understanding—it should be possible to implement all of the changes by October 2019.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: The Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Stéphane Dion, called for a proportional, preferential, and personalized voting system. He's not just anyone. Clearly, he's a man of the highest intellect, with a Ph.D. I'm not convinced that many of the people around the table today would be able to explain that system.

Do you think such a brand new voting system could be implemented and understood by Canadians within a 26-month time frame?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: As I said, regardless of the changes to the voting system, it's crucial to fully understand the importance of the public education campaign. The more complex the change, the more intensive the campaign must be and the sooner it must start.

I don't want to suggest that Elections Canada is the only authority responsible for that education. Concerted efforts will be necessary to make sure voters fully understand the methods and options available to them at the polling station.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Mr. Mayrand, how long does it take to hold a referendum? You spoke of six months when you appeared before the committee back in April or May.

What steps would you have to take during those six months to hold a nationwide referendum?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: The same logistical elements always come into play. Obviously, we would have to prepare the ballot setting out the question to Canadians. We would need to revise all the material that hasn't been reviewed since 1992 and redo all the training manuals for elections staff. Basically, we would have to prepare the materials to train the 255,000 Canadians who help administer elections.

We would also need to review all of our systems that are not yet tailored to a referendum. We estimate that about 15 computer systems would need to be adapted. What's more, certain contracting arrangements would be necessary as far as supplies and equipment were concerned.

All that to say that those six months would be a period of intensive preparation.

•(1045)

The Chair: Mr. Deltell, you have 10 seconds left.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: The word “intensive” is a euphemism in that case.

Do you really think six months is enough time? You don't think you'll need a bit longer?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Six months is the minimum. The time frames I'm giving you today aren't generous; they are the minimum periods of time required. It will be necessary to take into account the context in which a possible referendum would be held. I can't predict what else might be on the agenda at the same time.

The Chair: Thank you.

It is now Ms. Romanado's turn.

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

Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Mayrand.

Would you mind speaking to the use of technology to improve voting?

You mentioned the tabulation of election results. I volunteered as an elections worker for a number of years. When ballots are being counted, human error can enter into the mix. Things can be lost, and the process can take time.

Could you elaborate on that?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: As a volunteer, you no doubt noticed all the physical documentation in polling stations. There's some work that needs doing as far as automating procedures is concerned. There's no real reason why record books and forms shouldn't be automated. We think that would contribute to better compliance. We would see fewer errors, and those that were made would be detected by the devices being used.

Another option is making the list of electors available online, across the country. It would be available to campaigns all over the country and make it possible to determine whether those individuals had already voted.

Technology would give us multiple opportunities to simplify and improve the service and, I believe, enhance the integrity of the process. Some of the things I'm referring to would require legislative changes, and I'll talk about that in my September report. No matter which electoral system is in place come 2019, I think we need to make these changes and leverage technology.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Very good.

Many of us talked about online voting as a way to increase voter turnout among Canadians. We already have the option of filing our tax returns online or on paper, which isn't too difficult.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Let's just say it doesn't seem too difficult.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I'd like to know whether you're considering giving Canadians the option between voting online,

similar to electronic tax return filing, and going to the polling station and showing identification.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: In terms of any future work on the issue of online voting, I would say it's a fact. To my mind, there is no question of replacing traditional voting methods with online voting. We aren't able to do that. Similar to the voting options currently available to Canadians—voting at advance polls, by mail or by special ballot—online voting would simply be an additional way for electors to vote.

Canadians would choose the best option for them. Approximately 25% of voters prefer to vote at a time other than election day, and we are seeing a steady increase in that trend. That may suggest that some groups see a clear advantage in voting online, if it were an option. But that needs to be tested. As I already said, we are going to have to take a cautious, gradual approach.

•(1050)

[English]

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: In terms of accessibility, instead of selecting a specific group to pilot online voting, could we not leave how they would vote up to Canadians? I can order a pizza online, a Starbucks coffee, or charge up my bank account. I can do everything online. The day of the vote I may be busy. It may be raining, or maybe I don't want to go out that day. If I can do it from home, it gives me that option so I don't lose my opportunity to vote.

As I said, as someone who's worked a lot in elections, and also as a candidate trying to get out the vote, convincing Canadians to go out and vote and making sure they have the accessibility, whether being offered transport or making sure they are on the list and that they're able to see the vote, could really change the way we do our electoral process. I would hate to wait another two, three, four elections before we go that route.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: That's where we start going. We have to be careful. We also need to look at security. We want to preserve certain characteristics of the vote: confidentiality, secrecy, reliability, and integrity. When we start looking at moving online, I would point out the big difference currently in our system compared to any other services you get online: the risk of online services currently is the provider's. If you go online at a bank, you use your MasterCard, and somebody misuses it or accesses your account, the provider will cover that. That's one aspect that does not exist in the voting process.

The other aspect is that we lack a universal identification system in Canada. Without such a thing, it's very difficult to find some alternatives. The problem we have is that if you get a code with Revenue Canada, with the bank, or your PIN, everybody tells you to keep it secret, you have a personal interest in keeping it secret. I'm not sure we can say the same when it comes to voting.

The Chair: Thank you. We'll have to move on.

As long as we don't need a tax accountant to do it.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We'll go now to Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Mayrand, for being here today. I want to add my voice, and I'm sure we'll also get a formal opportunity down the road to do so, and thank you so much for your contribution.

I have spent a fair bit of time in the last few years working internationally as part of observer missions for elections and on anti-corruption issues relating to the work of the Auditor General and the public accounts committee. Every time I go out and then come back to Canada, I'm so appreciative of what we have. I understand more than ever that one of the strengths of our democracy is our institutions and the calibre of the people we appoint to run those institutions. Sir, Canadians from coast to coast owe you a huge debt of thanks for the work you have done on behalf of those citizens in ensuring that we have the fairest elections we can.

I would like to pick up on something that I tried to sneak in at the last meeting. Our eagle-eyed Chair jumped on me, rightly so, and said I could raise it in the usual discourse, so here I go.

It has to do with the amount of work that we're doing here, in particular on online voting and mandatory voting, that's specifically spelled out in the mandate. I've gone through these things as you know with your reports before, and what I wanted to raise with the minister and now with you is my concern that we can spend an awful lot of time getting into a whole lot of important details just on those two issues alone. My concern is that if we get too distracted from this very large macro picture we have of the overall voting system, we would get lost in these other issues.

Now on online voting I noticed that you recommend to us, or at least spell out, that one of the things that you would find helpful is some direction so that you can move forward on research with regard to Internet voting, given all the reasons you've just mentioned why it's not going to happen right away.

That's an easy one we could do by a quick motion, Chair, and boom that would send it off to the right place.

That leaves us with mandatory voting. I won't ask you about the details of it because that's not why we're here, but I will ask you this. You understand the procedure and House affairs committee as well as anybody, so would anything be lost in your opinion if we took the question of mandatory voting from this committee and referred it instead to that committee as part of your overall recommendations? Would something be lost in terms of timing or substance?

•(1055)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It's very difficult for me to really respond clearly and directly to your question.

I think the one thing that comes to mind first of all is that this committee has a mandate. The other aspect is that these issues require, I think, assessing what the social acceptability of online voting or mandatory voting. I understand that this committee will undertake extensive public consultations over the next short while, looking at these matters and voting systems.

I'm not aware if the procedure and House affairs committee has by tradition undertaken such broad consultations. That's the one caveat I would put out there. I think it's important to have significant

consultation on these matters. They are important and directly affect electors.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's a good point.

Mr. Reid also sits on the procedure and House affairs committee, and I don't know whether that's something we want to take up to clear the path for this committee, or leave it in here.

However, I'll move on to another issue. Just circling back to the issue of the amount of time necessary, I want to be crystal clear.

Regardless of whatever option we're looking at, so far you're keeping an eye on what we're doing and looking in your crystal ball, trying to determine where we're going and getting out in front. Does that include a complete rework, not just a redoing of the boundaries, but actually a whole different approach in terms of regional ridings? I understand that clustering would save some time.

I just want to be absolutely clear that as long as we give you this period of time, if we have that law in place by May 2017, regardless of how ambitious a recommended change we'd like to make, you feel that it would give you adequate time to do that, sir.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I would have to.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Given the October 19—

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, there are only so many things you can make fit that don't fit.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: As I said and will repeat, it should be okay, but you should not underestimate the challenges it will represent.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thanks very much.

Earlier in one of your question and answers with another member here, you had started on something and I think the time had expired in the round. I'd like to continue on it, talking a little bit about this idea of the boundary distribution process. In your opening remarks you talked about the importance of the establishment of independent commissions and how important that is as part of the process, and then a little bit in that question and answer portion about communities of interest. So we're talking about what Mr. Christopherson was just talking about, the idea of regional groupings or multi-member seats and those kinds of things, and how important communities of interest are in that.

I can certainly think of several different parts of the country—and northern Alberta in my province is one of the examples of that—where, when you just try to group two or three ridings together you can create some very significant drive times. If we don't have these independent commissions and the idea of considering the communities of interest and hearing from local people, and doing full consultations to ensure that they're not being disadvantaged by having their member not able to properly access the riding, for example, or there could be a number of other problems....

I wonder if you could speak to the importance of the independent commissions and considering the communities of interest in any redistribution process that might take place for a different voting system.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: In my view, it is absolutely essential that there be an independent, non-partisan, objective process looking at how we determine the boundaries of various districts. That takes time because community of interest needs to be defined in each particular area of the country.

Even looking at a streamlined process to simply aggregate the current ridings, you will have pockets there where aggregation will not necessarily be the best way to go. You may find, among other things, community of interest could be linguistic so you may suddenly, through aggregation, completely dilute a community of interest. That's an example. There are plenty of others we can come up with. That's why I'm saying that it needs public consultation.

Again, it's an important part for electors to feel properly represented. You have to be part of a community.

• (1100)

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, I appreciate that. I would agree with you that is a very important thing and it's not just as simple as grouping a couple of ridings together and assuming—

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It's not a strictly mathematical matter.

Mr. Blake Richards: I appreciate that and I understand the difficulties and the importance of that task and the timelines that can be created there.

That's where I wanted to go with my next question to you. You've been fairly clear today in talking about the last redistribution process taking 26 months. You've indicated that maybe it's possible, under certain circumstances, that you could shave a little bit of time off that but it wouldn't be much. It sounds like you're talking about two years to be able to do that process, at the very bare minimum by the sound of it.

You've also mentioned that in order to do a referendum you feel six months would be a minimum set-up time for that.

I want to get a sense, though, of a scenario where there is a significant redistribution required because of a change in the voting system, but also obviously a desire to do a referendum. You've said that in isolation 24 months may be the bare minimum to do the redistribution; and in isolation, six months the bare minimum to do a referendum.

If you had a scenario where you're doing a redistribution and holding a referendum, would you see that timeline expanding beyond 24 months? In other words, you said May 2017. If this

process were completed by May 2017, could you conduct a referendum and do a full redistribution if necessary in that timeline?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: We are, of course, scenario-making, and it's very hypothetical so I always hesitate.

If there were to be a referendum it would have to take place early on because that's possibly going to determine the course of action, so it seems to me it would have to be happening very early on in the process—

Mr. Blake Richards: So what you're saying then is—

The Chair: We're just about up, but—

Mr. Blake Richards: —that if the government wants to see a referendum has the opportunity to take place it would have to act very quickly to ensure that could take place.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes, and I could foresee scenarios that would allow for it, that's all I'm saying.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. DeCoursey.

[*Translation*]

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

Again, Mr. Mayrand, thank you for being here. Thank you, as well, for your decade of leadership in election matters. I appreciated your presentation, taking many notes. I learned quite a bit today.

I've noticed that my fellow committee members have talked a lot about the timetable for implementing the changes to the electoral system. In your presentation, you said, and I quote, "I note that the government has committed to having legislation in place by May 2017, which I am comfortable with."

[*English*]

Now we know there will be challenges. We know it's an ambitious agenda, but Canadians have asked us to be ambitious in this pursuit. There are different variables. I know doomsday hypotheticals have been thrown out in certain parts of this committee, but can you confirm for us that you are comfortable, given the different variables at play, that a change to the system could be initiated, that Elections Canada could be provided with the proper resources to help conduct the next election?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: If I have clear directions from Parliament by May 2017, yes, I think we can make it happen.

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: I assume part of that will be the way that Parliament reacts to your report to be delivered later this fall.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: And to the report of this committee.

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: Absolutely, and this committee is looking forward to that report being tabled in Parliament. The committee work will include looking at various systems as well as mandatory and online voting, which are explicitly part of the mandate of this committee. Given our chance to consult with Canadians, given the reports that will ask us to consider a more robust mandate for Elections Canada, do you feel Elections Canada has the capacity to help lead an outreach sensitization and education campaign with other organizations across the country to ensure that all Canadians whether young students, residents of remote rural areas, seniors, deployed troops, and those with disabilities or exceptionalities have the opportunity to exercise their democratic right?

• (1105)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: That capacity would have to be augmented, but we certainly have the experience and the expertise to engage more broadly in that area.

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: I'm particularly interested in the role that Elections Canada can play working with first-time voters, potential first-time voters on university campuses. In Atlantic Canada we have 16 universities, not to mention community colleges and other private institutions. I have two in the riding I represent, UNB and St. Thomas. What role could Elections Canada or other organizations play working on campus to help facilitate first-time voting, and perhaps as well in communities to reach young people who aren't attending post-secondary education?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: A few things could be done. One that certainly comes to mind, and I thought it was part of this committee's responsibility but maybe not, is that we could reach out to youth before they reach the age of 18 and start registering them before they leave high school. One of the great barriers that youth are facing currently is that often they have the lowest rate of registration. If you're not registered it gets a bit more complicated to get information about the election, and to vote per se.

One thing that could be done is to register them even before voting age so that when they reach voting age they are automatically on the list of electors, they get the information, they know where to get the information, and where and when to vote. That's one thing; that's registration.

On the other aspect, a pilot we did this time around was to offer a special service on a number of campuses across the country. That was quite successful in terms of the turnout. I think we reached out to 72,000 young Canadians who voted through that process. We need to look at whether we can expand it for the next election and make it broader. The cost is another issue.

The Chair: Mr. DeCoursey, you're kicking off the second round so there's a seamlessness here. Is that all right with you?

[Translation]

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: That works for me.

We observed that students in Fredericton really appreciated being able to vote on campus. That worked out very well.

[English]

I wonder if maybe you could share some evidence that demonstrates that engaging young Canadians, those below 18 and those entering adulthood, in education around civic affairs,

democratic institutions, voting, helps enhance voter turnout and helps encourage long-term participation in the process. We absolutely want to encourage greater numbers of Canadians voting. I'm convinced of that. Is there any direction you can send us?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes. There are some surveys that we've done and some studies that have been done across the country that suggest two things. Voting is an early habit. It's a habit that you need to develop early, otherwise you become an habitual non-voter. If someone misses two elections, it's much more difficult to bring the individual back.

The most significant factor or predictor of voting by young people is civic education. There is clear evidence that those who have been exposed to a civic education curriculum have a much higher propensity to vote. It's clear also that interest in voting comes from knowledge about democracy and your institutions. Again, that's where civic education is a significant influencer. It's probably, in my view, the most important influencer.

• (1110)

[Translation]

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: I would think that we—

[English]

Mr. Marc Mayrand: We can build all sorts of online services, remove all sorts of barriers, but if people don't have the interest, don't have the knowledge, they may not take advantage of the opportunity. I think these things go hand in hand.

[Translation]

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: I would think that we should play a role by encouraging our provincial allies to make sure their education systems favour that approach.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Absolutely.

[English]

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: I'm all for encouraging early engagement in voting. At the same time, do you have any advice on how we can grab those who may have been disenfranchised along the way and haven't exercised their right to vote? Perhaps, for any number of variables, they're apart from the system.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It is a most significant challenge and it remains a challenge for us. One thing that we've done over the last few years, one thing we found, is that it's better that those disengaged are re-engaged by people they relate to. If it's not their family or their teachers, it's maybe their friends. We're trying to leverage—that's not necessarily the right expression—various groups that are committed to engaging those who are more vulnerable or face barriers or are truly outside the system. It's by going through those channels that you improve your chances of success in re-engaging them. But it's an effort that requires time, consistency, perseverance, and also listening carefully to what these people have to say.

[Translation]

Mr. Matt DeCoursey: Thank you kindly for your advice.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Reid, you may go ahead for five minutes.

[English]

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much.

Mr. Mayrand, from my point of view it appears that the government is trying to run out the clock so that it will be impossible to have both a new electoral system that involves redistribution and a referendum on that new system. This can be done, of course, simply by refusing to say yes or no to a referendum until the deadline by which you could have done both things has passed.

I'm not asking for your comment on this, I'm submitting this to the world at large. I would submit that this explains the steadfast refusal of the minister yesterday to either endorse a referendum or to say that she rejects a referendum, while at the same time making it clear that she refuses to do what is necessary to modernize the referendum legislation.

My questions to you now revolve around how to stop the scenario of having the deadline on a referendum click by silently so that the government can, after the fact, finally introduce a real argument against a referendum, which is it's just too late.

Bearing this in mind, I've been looking at different options that would allow us to extend the clock a bit, and one I wanted to ask you about is a model used in the province of Ontario. Ten years ago the legislature in Ontario enacted a piece of legislation called Bill 155, Electoral System Referendum Act, 2007, which essentially said that the model that was then being designed would not be put in place unless there was a referendum on it.

I'm not sure if combining the government's proposed legislation on a new system with a clause that says this new electoral system will only go into effect if it's approved in a referendum.... If that were done as a single piece of legislation, would it be possible for you to implement this in less than the 26 months, plus six months, that I think we now face under the status quo?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: The two-year timing is not just driven by redistribution and a referendum or not, it's very much driven by the need to change our whole operation. No one in this country has experience in administering an alternative voting system. That's a profound change.

The other thing is that we have to redo all our systems. There are over 40 IT systems involved in an election. Not knowing the specifics, I can't tell you today, but I suspect that most of these systems will either have to be tuned or maybe scratched and started over again. That's why we need those two years. There's work in parallel. While redistribution is happening, the preparation for the election is also occurring, and that part takes two years.

Again, in other parts of the world, you will be looking I'm sure at New Zealand. It took almost 10 years before they ran into their new system. I'm saying yes, it's possible, but I'd be very cautious about trying to streamline it further and reduce that timeline. My advice would be you would put the election at risk.

• (1115)

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you. That's very helpful.

I only have a minute here. The New Zealand model, surely it was not 10 years from the time the legislation was passed for the MMP system until the first election was held.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: No, it was the whole cycle, starting from the parliamentary committee, public discussion, to finally getting an election under the new system that had been adopted. It was close to a decade, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: The New Zealand model of change in many ways is the one that has the most credibility here. I'm not saying that the MMP model they've used there is the best one, that would be premature of me. But the model of going through and transitioning is the closest thing I think we have to a gold standard for a Westminster-style country like Canada.

Could you take a look at what they did and point out to us—it can be in writing—any helpful lessons you can draw from that, that might guide us?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I could propose witnesses to the committee who would speak directly to the New Zealand experience.

Mr. Scott Reid: That would be helpful.

The Chair: Thank you, that would be very helpful.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'd like to follow on the questions of Mr. Reid. I'm not sure it's an area that we've spent a lot of time talking about publicly just yet in terms of getting the horse in front of the cart here. I'm not sure the Conservatives have done their homework. If they have, I haven't figured out the strategy yet. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it would seem to me that you cannot hold a referendum during a federal election. In fact, if a writ has been dropped for a referendum and then there's a subsequent general election writ, even if the day of the referendum is scheduled for the day of the election, it's deemed nullified. Is that correct?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: You're correct. A referendum cannot be run in combination with an election.

Mr. David Christopherson: Correct, so that means it has to be a stand-alone under the current act and in order to back it up a bit you need marching orders by May 2017 in order to meet all eventualities. As soon as you're given those, money starts being spent, time starts being focused, and there's no going back, you don't get to push the button reset and start another 26 months, you've got to do it all the first time around. One would think if you back it up another six months to prepare it so the referendum was say May 1, or the last day of April, now that puts us some time around December of this year. Is it fair to say that if we don't have a total package by December 16 to give to you to trigger a referendum, we would not be able to meet the deadline if it was a complete reform of the system and you needed most of that 26-27 months?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Again—

Mr. David Christopherson: You don't follow that, I know, sorry.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: There are many variables at play here. I just want to be clear, I think it's possible to hold a referendum under the current legislation. What I need is an indication that a referendum will be happening so that I can start spending in preparation and preparing for it.

Mr. David Christopherson: When do you need that by?

• (1120)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Again, the sooner the better. You mentioned, and it's certainly a case scenario among others, that there could be a referendum in spring 2017. That would be triggered by a proclamation that will have been preceded by debates in the House of Commons, and these debates will have been announced in advance. I'm hoping we will get that six months, that we'll get enough indication to trigger the six-month activities.

Mr. David Christopherson: Correct me if I'm wrong, but if the committee in its wisdom by majority decides to go with—I mean PR is the big thing that we're looking at, so let's just call it that for the sake of an argument—a PR system of some sort and you feel that you're going to need most of the 25, 26, 27 months at hand, is it fair to say then that you need some kind of indication by the end of this year that the committee by majority will, or I guess the House ultimately, would trigger to you in order to.... Do you see what I'm saying? If you need six months to do the referendum and you need 25-26 months to do a complete makeover if we go to PR, then is it not reasonable to say that if you don't have that signal from Parliament by December of this year, there's a good chance that Mr. Reid is correct that Parliament, whether they want to or not, have perhaps missed the point at which they could hold a referendum where Canadians would then make that decision that it goes forward?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I see the process as somewhat evolved and progressing. A few weeks ago I didn't know if a parliamentary committee would be created and when. Now we know. Now I know that December 1 is the deadline for a report. I expect that I will get some sense of the level of consensus, some sense of direction that will help me in starting to at least plan for what needs to be done. I expect that the government—given their commitment to May 2017—will respond rather quickly to the committee report. So, again, more precision will come. This is all speculative at this point in time, I'm not saying it's anything else.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Thériault.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault: I'd like to know whether you've done any studies in the past on online voting. You are aware of the problems Quebec experienced with that in 2005. I imagine that, even under the current voting system, you would be able to further automate the process or offer online voting. That was my understanding.

Is that correct?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: We did a fair number of intensive studies for a few years, at the beginning of the decade, and we do indeed have a solid grasp of the issues, the barriers, the possibilities, and the associated risks. I can share that information with the committee.

Mr. Luc Thériault: That would be helpful. Thank you.

I know politics isn't something you're involved in. We, on our end, have a mandate that you do not. However, your job is heavily dependent upon what emerges this December 1. I'm drawing on your vast experience, as far as the institution and the administration of electoral events goes. I'm also relying on your wisdom as someone who will be leaving their position soon.

You talked about New Zealand's experience. You talked about education and information. I'm not familiar with the penetration rate or effectiveness of your campaigns, but do you not think that an election involving a referendum question is one of the best ways to guarantee a clear penetration rate in terms of the issues and choices facing voters?

I, personally, have no problem with amending the legislation in order to hold a referendum the same day, by adding an extra box to include the matter of the new voting system, especially since the price tag of holding a one-off referendum is said to be \$300 million.

Wouldn't it make more sense for parliamentarians and society as a whole to take the time to do that? That would help move us toward a decision that would be in effect for the next election.

• (1125)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I'm not in a position to advise you on the timetable. I think the committee will quickly understand the challenges and its ability to meet the deadlines. I'm not in a position to comment on that.

You talked about a combined referendum-election, which would require legislative changes. It's not impossible. I would say, however, that, more and more, referendums are being conducted by mail, and that significantly reduces the cost. As I said, all sorts of scenarios are possible, but it will be necessary to revisit referendum legislation.

Mr. Luc Thériault: Did you understand my question? You said it would be possible if you had clear direction. Given the scope of the task, coming up with clear guidelines in such a short amount of time is a whole mandate unto itself. You did say “if”. It's entirely possible that we won't come up with clear guidelines.

It's difficult to recruit elections staff. What's more, under our current voting system—which has been in place for decades—it's also difficult to properly train those people from one election to another. In light of that, do you not think it would be smarter to take the time necessary in order to make the right changes?

Wouldn't Elections Canada be better equipped if the matter were dealt with as part of a future mandate?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Without knowing which scenarios are being considered, I can't answer that. As I've already said multiple times, I believe that, with a specific scenario in May 2017, I would be able to run an election based on that scenario in 2019.

If, however, neither the committee nor the government is able to provide a scenario, then, obviously, I would have to revise my—

The Chair: Unfortunately, the clock is giving me clear direction: I have to turn the floor over to Ms. May.

[*English*]

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you, and it's an honour again to get to ask a few more questions of you, Mr. Mayrand.

On the online voting question, I've seen in some commentaries that there's a societal benefit in the social cohesion of people collectively experiencing voting, even the lining up—I think we've all had great experiences as voters before we became candidates—and what happens when you're standing in line. Is there any literature on this? Is this a concern to be weighed against the convenience factor of online voting?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I've certainly heard about it. I don't recall reading about it. That doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. We can see if we can find anything about it.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Elections Canada hasn't done research on it though.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: On that aspect specifically no, but it is an issue that has come up in various focus groups or discussion forums.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I would like to get to this question about timing that's come up a few times; David Christopherson mentioned it. Under current law you can't hold a federal referendum during a federal election. On the other hand I know that the New Brunswick Referendum Act specifically says you can only hold a referendum when you're having a general election. Is that a change that could be made in the Elections Act, to allow a referendum at the same time?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It would be in the Referendum Act.

Ms. Elizabeth May: We know the current Referendum Act doesn't work in any event for electoral reform because it's quite limited to the constitutional question. We'd have to amend the Referendum Act to allow it to take place at the same time as a federal election.

My next question is a Twitter question from David McLaughlin. I think a lot of us know because he was the chief of staff of the late Jim Flaherty and the last CEO of the national round table. He has

asked me to ask, what would be the cost of a referendum? If a stand-alone referendum was \$300 million what would be the cost of a referendum, if you could speculate, if the law were changed, and it was in conjunction with a federal election?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: In conjunction there would be additional incremental costs, but of course we're not talking of the same order obviously because most of the costs still have to be incurred. It would probably mean a second ballot, and would probably need a few more staff to handle the thing and especially the count in these matters. It would be marginally more expensive.

● (1130)

Ms. Elizabeth May: That's helpful, thank you.

I have a question from someone watching us in Langley, B.C., who sent this question from Twitter. Given your experience at Elections Canada in monitoring the level of communications that go out in a general election, I don't know if it's possible. Will Breeze from Langley wants to know, can all referendum ads and publications—and this is hypothetical because we're not planning a referendum—be subject to fact-checking and/or fines?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: That's an interesting question. That's truly a public policy question. It's less a feasibility matter than whether it's a desirable matter. On this point I trust parliamentarians to give us direction in that regard.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I'm going to go to something that I'm interested in, again along the lines of my last question in the last round, about if we combined existing electoral districts would that make things any easier. It certainly was a difficult exercise before the 2015 election to add 30 seats to Parliament. We had very specific working groups right across the country and we carved out 30 new ridings. This is a hypothetical, but if the committee were to lean toward a system that required creating new seats such as in a mixed member proportional system, would there be any logic or benefit to looking at returning to the electoral districts we had in 2011 and adding the 30 seats that way?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Everything is possible. That's an interesting question. I'll need to think about it. Again it would require all sorts of changes to the readjustment act because it sets a quota of population per riding. We need to change all that. If I understand your question it's whether we could go back to 308 ridings and add 30 based on proportional representation. It sounds very attractive, but I'm not sure you entirely escape the need for redistribution.

Ms. Elizabeth May: You're the expert, that's why I asked you.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Those 30 seats now have to be redistributed across the country, by province.

[Translation]

The Chair: We understand fully. That becomes very complicated.

It is now Ms. Romanado's turn.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you.

[English]

I know we've been talking a lot about online voting today. Given your background and the work you've done in the past, it's something that we want to hear more about.

I come from the post-secondary education sector so engaging youth in the democratic process is really important to me. You mentioned earlier that if we can get students or young people engaged early enough they become lifelong voters. I know that in a local CEGEP near me in the riding of Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine we had the booth set up specifically so that they could go to vote, which was a great success.

But we also have in my riding an aging senior population, so I'd like to get your ideas, again, on how we can leverage the technology so that the youth we've just engaged—we had the highest level for young people turning out in the last election—are kept engaged, but we are also mindful of an aging population who are going to have mobility issues.

Can you elaborate a little bit on that and the importance of that? In the next four years and in the next eight years we are going to have that problem.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I believe the problem may be exacerbated by the social policy that we have to keep seniors in their homes. We're talking more and more about home care providers, and this means that those seniors will no longer be living in common residences. That means to some extent there will be barriers to their voting. I can't service residential homes. I can hardly service every single Canadian at home, and that is a problem I see coming over the next decade, I would say.

We are already getting increasing demands for home-bound voting and if not this committee, Parliament, at some time needs to consider how we are going to allow people who have voted all their lives to continue to vote. This is their act of citizenship, so how are we going to maintain that accessibility for them?

You will find that I am a little bit pushy but I think, again, in 10 to 20 years these seniors will be used to technology, and again, online voting may be part of the solution for them, so there is a link with all these things.

• (1135)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Absolutely.

On the flip side, if Canada did want to implement online voting—and now I'm talking about folks who are in rural areas who may not have broadband Internet—what would be some of the barriers for our being able to implement something? Again, I bring up maybe lack of Internet or good Internet access.

Could you elaborate on some of the other barriers?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Connectivity, even though it's improving all the time, remains an issue in many parts of the country. As I

mentioned earlier, electronic tabulation may have its limits for very remote areas for the simple fact that connectivity is not always up to par. I think that's a government as a whole issue that needs to be prioritized. I believe there are various programs to improve broadband access and speedy Internet access across the country and it's an effort that needs to be continued.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: This may seem like a little bit of a bizarre question but in your capacity as the Chief Electoral Officer, what would you recommend our role be in terms of helping to educate? You have 338 members of Parliament across Canada. You mentioned that you're not able to educate those over the age of 18, but what could we be doing to assist the Chief Electoral Officer in increasing engagement and so on and so forth?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Aside from amending the legislation? I think an important aspect is this. When we study non-voters, one of the things that comes out is that because of all sorts of reasons there is less and less personal contact between electors and candidates. Any time you show up at a school, any time you show up at a community activity, there is evidence that it makes a difference.

The Chair: That's very interesting.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I'd be happy to share that with you, but it does make a difference in terms of engaging young people, particularly.

The Chair: That's very encouraging for all of us because we do a lot of that and we always want to do more.

Monsieur Deltell.

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Mayrand, I'd like to turn to the readjustment of electoral boundaries. You're an expert, and as we all know, it's a very delicate issue. I want to make this very clear for everyone: if we don't support change, it doesn't mean that we are biased towards a more favourable option, as elected representatives, or that we are engaging in political mathematics. It is simply that we have formed an attachment with the people we represent.

I'm not going to tell you my life story, but back in 2012, when I was an MLA, I lost the Valcartier and Shannon portions of my riding, Chauveau. That saddened me greatly, one reason being that the area was home to the anglophone community, whom I was very fond of and represented to the best of my ability, like the rest of my constituents. It really had an effect on me. It had nothing to do with the numbers. At the end of the day, I lost those parts of my riding.

That's why, when we talk about electoral boundaries, it's important to understand that our positions don't stem from political calculations but, rather, a reality that we need to respect—the underlying socio-demographic fabric of the riding we represent. If the government decided not to hold a referendum on changing the voting system and to introduce proportional representation, proportional-preferential-personalized voting, single transferable voting, a list system, or preferential voting, changes would have to be made to the electoral map in most cases.

That brings me to an issue you are no doubt familiar with, the situation that arose in 2004 in the Acadie—Bathurst riding. The Chief Electoral Officer at the time had readjusted the electoral boundaries, a change that was challenged by not only the member for the riding, but also members of the local chamber of commerce and other constituents. Here again, I am setting aside any partisan motives. The matter even made its way to the courts, which sided with the constituents, who argued that electoral boundaries should not be touched for very specific reasons.

If the government decides to proceed with an alternative voting system that requires a redistribution of electoral boundaries, would you be prepared to deal with court decisions, which could, once again, lead to further delays?

• (1140)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Elections Canada normally doesn't get involved in those kinds of disputes. Obviously, they can have repercussions, but the fact remains that those decisions are made by independent commissions. That's very different from the provincial system, I want to stress. The independent commissions have to take into account factors such as communities of interest and, as in the case you brought up, language communities.

In that specific case, the Federal Court found that the commission had not given sufficient consideration to that criterion and asked the commission to do the job over again. Since the commission had been dissolved by that point, another one had to be formed. I won't get into all the details.

Situations of that nature can occur, but they are rare, if not very rare. Our legal system ensures that those who feel their rights have been violated as a result of a decision have the ability to launch a court challenge.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: I am asking you the question precisely because the matter is outside your jurisdiction. You're essentially being held hostage by an independent body that can make a decision to redistribute electoral boundaries. You are forced to deal with that decision, which has the potential to be challenged. Earlier, you were talking about the 26-month timetable and the fact that it wasn't a generous amount of time, calling it a minimum. But this involves more than a minimum amount of time.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Clearly, anything can happen. We always have to take the context into account. Right now, we are talking about 12 months. If you add to the mix legal challenges to redistribution, it could definitely change things for certain parts of the country.

Would it bring the process to a complete halt? I'm not sure. I'd need to know what the challenge was about.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: I'd like to wrap up by thanking Mr. Mayrand and his team. I'd also like to highlight the fact that making changes to democratic institutions is a very delicate business. It's essential to have time on our side. In fact, working under a tight deadline is the worst thing we could do. It's the same in baseball: having the time to do things right is critical. Time shouldn't factor into a decision as important as this one when we're dealing with the future of our democracy. It's essential that we change the voting system. It's something we hold very dear, so that's why we need to take the time to do it right. My understanding of the Chief Electoral Officer's remarks is that we should take the time to look closely at the big picture before making a decision.

The Chair: That brings us to our ninth inning, so to speak.

Ms. Sahota, you may go ahead.

[*English*]

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

I was very interested in the comment you made to my colleague's question regarding engagement in the community of MPs, and the outcome of civic engagement. You said that you had numbers and studies for that. Is that something that you can provide this committee with? I'd be very interested in looking at that.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes, definitely.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

Moving on, as my colleague mentioned getting more engagement, whether it is youth or seniors, I've also seen newcomers who have become citizens in this country. One organization in my community has informed me they've come across people who have been in their apartment for years, whether they're disabled or whatever, because they don't know how to use the services and they don't know how to move around. That's a gap in our system, and we can educate newcomers about that. How about educating new citizens about the voting process? Is that something Elections Canada can do?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: We try to do it. Particularly during the election campaign, we try to reach out. We publish basic information on voting during a federal election in 35 heritage languages. These languages are revised periodically to reflect the immigration demographic in the country. We also try very hard to recruit personnel who reflect the diversity of a riding.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: How so, and what does that personnel do?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: That personnel will do the day-to-day tasks, but they will be able to speak the language of electors in that riding. When they are a large community, we'll make a special effort to reach out to leaders in the community so they refer staff who can speak some of the languages. We have community relations officers, younger officers, who also function in some ridings—not across the country, in some ridings—where there is high diversity, who are tasked to reach out to community groups or community associations, again making sure that they have the information they need to inform their members. We have different initiatives and programs to try to reach out to new Canadians.

One thing about new Canadians, the evidence again shows that the first generation of new Canadians has a lower participation rate, but it picks up very quickly. It seems to be a single generation. There doesn't seem to be a generational transfer there. In a way it's positive. That being said, we need to continue to work on first-generation Canadians.

• (1145)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Yes.

I have a quick comment. I did notice that in this last election many people in my riding were housebound and didn't know how they could get service in their home. There are some communication issues there that we can improve on.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Communication and capacity. You need to understand that the test in the act is that the person who is housebound could not put an X on the ballot. That's a very narrow interpretation. Many of the calls we're getting are from people who could mark a ballot, but cannot move out of their home. They consider themselves housebound. But that's not the test in the Elections Act. Sorry to be so technical, but that's what we're facing.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Okay.

I know you've been avoiding giving your preference on any system, but are there pitfalls or things that you can caution us about? I know that in the report and in your presentation you talked a little about Canadians being used to getting their results on election night and not wanting to wait any longer. That's a pitfall: we may perhaps be steering away from certain systems over others. Are there other cautionary tales you can tell us from other countries?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: In my mind the most important one—and I think the committee is setting itself up for that—is this. I would not underestimate the lack of information, understanding, and education about our electoral process. Most people see it as marking a ballot, not necessarily understanding all the ramifications it entails. I think in changing from a system that is relatively simple and easy to understand from a voter perspective, we should not underestimate the level of education that is required for people to start having a discussion on these matters.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Boulerice.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Mayrand, is encouraging people to vote and increasing voter turnout an important part of Elections Canada's mission?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I think the fairly recent amendments made clear that that wasn't Elections Canada's role.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Yes. We, in the NDP, believe in the importance of increasing voter turnout. For everyone's benefit and so that the analysts can make note of it, I'd like to point out that our Liberal colleagues are talking about involving Canadians and improving citizen engagement, including among young people. I want to draw attention to the fact that voter turnout increases by 7% when a voting system includes some level of proportional representation. I won't ask you to speak to that, Mr. Mayrand.

In 1979, the Pépin-Robarts commission recommended adopting a mixed member proportional system based on the one in Germany. In 2004, the Law Commission of Canada recommended a mixed member proportional system modelled after Scotland's. Under that system, two-thirds of MPs would be elected as they are today, in other words, through first past the post, and the other third would be elected using party lists.

More proportional representation can be achieved in a variety of ways, be it regionally or provincially. At the regional level, in urban areas such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, it wouldn't be too difficult to imagine merging certain electoral districts to achieve that proportional representation. In rural areas with lower population density, however, we obviously wouldn't group the Northwest Territories together with the Yukon to create a multi-member seat.

Administratively speaking, would it be possible or manageable to have a system where certain urban or suburban electoral districts were grouped together but where electoral districts spanning vast areas retained their single-member seats?

• (1150)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I think certain witnesses would be better suited to answer those questions. Given the country's diversity and size, the problems you are trying to solve will require a made-in-Canada solution. It's very tough to compare a country like Scotland with a country like Canada, which is essentially a continent. There is no doubt that, in the course of your work, you are going to have to find truly Canadian solutions. Relevant research has been done, so I'm certain you'll hear from witnesses this afternoon who can talk about that.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: As democrats, we believe that Parliament should represent all of society's views, the oft-mentioned diversity of voices or plurality of ideas, and should, in fact, be representative of society itself. But we've got a problem. Only 13% of members elected in the last election are from visible minority groups. That percentage represents just half of the visible minorities that are part of Canadian society. In Canada's Parliament, only 26% of MPs are women, putting Canada in 49th place, behind Kazakhstan, South Sudan, and Tunisia. That's not much to be proud of.

Would you say that how we elect our MPs is one of the reasons why it's so difficult for Canada to achieve proportional, or realistic, representation in Parliament, particularly as regards visible minorities and women?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It may be one of the factors contributing to the problem. How parties operate may be another factor, specifically in terms of the candidate selection process. Measures might be needed. For example, do any measures provide for funding to offset additional child care costs incurred during the election campaign? All sorts of measures can influence participation and diversity. That's my point.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds left.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: We could adopt a system based on lists and rules requiring half of a party's candidates to be female.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: That's an idea.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I want to return to the topic I was on earlier and I think others have been on. I just want to make sure I'm completely clear. I ask for your indulgence if you feel it's being repetitive.

You had indicated when we talked about the topic of the scenarios where the decision is that we're going to want to see a referendum conducted, but also a significant change to the system and those timelines.... I think that what I was hearing from you was that if you receive some kind of an indication prior to the end of this year, basically you could start to prepare for a referendum. I think it was in response to Mr. Christopherson's question

I'm trying to get a sense of this. I think what you were saying there was that if you had an indication in the committee report that comes out by December, you would be able to start to prepare for a referendum and that would give you enough time. Was that what I heard or am I being inaccurate?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: What I was trying to convey is that as this whole process evolves there will be I expect, or I hope, more clarity. To me there are two markers in my mind. The first is December 1, which is the date of the report of this committee, and that will give me an indication of the level of consensus about possible reforms and all these things. As I monitor the environment, that will guide my actions. The next thing is that May 2017 or so I expect to see legislation in place.

I fully understand that to have legislation in place by May 2017 it has to be tabled in early winter, let's say. That's how I'm looking at

things, that there will be events happening that will trigger my activation of various preparations and plans.

• (1155)

Mr. Blake Richards: What I would want to know in a follow-up to that is, is there an absolute drop-dead date? Is there an absolute latest date by which you would need to have the government actually show its intention to actually call a referendum? We get that you might have some indication from this committee and the discussions here, but would there be some kind of a deadline by which you would have to have an absolute commitment that the government wants to call a referendum in order for there to be a referendum and to be able to conduct redistribution if it was necessary?

I just want to get a sense if there's an absolute deadline, that you would see it would be impossible to meet otherwise.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It's very difficult.

Let's say by next spring there's nothing on the table. Right there, that tells me that unless some urgent meetings happen in the summer it means I won't see anything before the end of 2018. That means January 2019, and that means nine months before the election. I think we're out of it.

Again, I think that's why I put those markers; that's the one I'm using right now and there may be more as the environment evolves for sure.

Mr. Blake Richards: Is there anything you can suggest that could be done now, that the government could do or could look at, in order to prepare for the possibility of a referendum? Is there anything you would suggest could be done now to better prepare or to ensure that is still a possibility and the timeline doesn't get away from us?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I couldn't speak for the government. I don't know what scenarios—

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, but if you were asked for advice.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: —are being contemplated by the government and what actions are taking place.

Mr. Blake Richards: What I'm asking is, are there legislative steps or is there anything that could be done to help better prepare for that possibility?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: There are all sorts of things, but probably the government needs also some sense of where this committee is going. Again, the first thing government would have to do is decide what kind of legislation they want to introduce. Do they want to amend the redistribution act? Do they want to amend the Referendum Act? Do they want to amend the Canada Elections Act or is there something else?

However, that's for the government to consider in terms of their plan of action and the timelines for it. I can't comment on that.

Mr. Blake Richards: I understand that you have to react to what you're given, and I certainly appreciate the timelines you have to deal with and we appreciate knowing that you have given us some sense as to what it looks like for you in order to complete these things. We appreciate that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Last on the list, but not least, we have Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag: Thank you.

I was going to get into the weeds a little, but since I'm now last on the list, I'm going to give you a chance for some final thoughts on four areas.

The first one is, as we move forward on looking at electoral reform, what would you say is the top challenge of our current system that we need to be aware of? Some of these you may have already covered, but I'll just give you a chance to wrap up.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I did a presentation to PROC some time ago, looking at various social trends. One is that the changing demographic of our population and the increased savvy of Canadians with technologies are all factors. At least as an administrator, Elections Canada needs to get a little nimbler and more flexible, and needs to be empowered by legislation to adapt its services to the circumstances of electors. I think it's something we've seen in recent years, and there is an expectation out there, here in Canada and internationally in convention, that we adapt our service offering—for lack of a better expression—to the circumstances of Canadians. For me, this is one of the top challenges.

I feel that I've exhausted what the current legislation allows me to do to reach out, for example, to those with disabilities, or who are homebound, or to adapt the system such that we don't have lineups at the polls, as we've seen at advance polls.

I need your support on changing the legislation in these regards.

• (1200)

Mr. John Aldag: Sure, and what you're saying leads into my second area, and that's the issue of aboriginal engagement, which we haven't talked about. Do you have any thoughts on how we increase aboriginal engagement?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Again, it's an ongoing challenge for Elections Canada. Mind you, there has been progress. I think we need to take stock of things. The participation rate of first nations has increased consistently over the last several elections, and it's progressively closing the gap with the rest of the population.

It's very easy for me to say that, but depending on where you live in the country, you will see great disparities in turnout and in participation. Again, that's a challenge: how do you build a trust relationship so we can engage again with communities, and adapt our service offering to their cultural, societal needs?

Again, I'll bring it back to my original challenge: we need some flexibility in the legislation.

Mr. John Aldag: The third one is, simply, what would you say is a unique Canadian attribute that we need to consider when moving forward? Of all the things we talked about, what would be the number one Canadian challenge or attribute that we need to have front of mind as we design a new system?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I would say that an attribute in Canada is no different from other countries. You will soon see some surveys that have been done from various perspectives, and multiple surveys that show that Canadians have an extremely high level of trust in their electoral system. This is very fragile. Once you lose it, it's very difficult to regain.

My caution, or my point here, is this: be extremely careful and sensitive to anything that's being done that may impact the trust of Canadians.

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

[*Translation*]

I'd like to thank you for joining us today. You've given us insight and key guidelines that have helped us put matters into context. You've clarified multiple technical points.

I, too, want to thank you for your outstanding service during your time in office. I wish you great success in the future.

[*English*]

I would remind members of the steering committee that we have a meeting at 1:15 in Room 112-N.

[*Translation*]

Did I forget something? No. Okay, then. Thank you kindly, Mr. Mayrand.

Our thanks to Mr. Perrault and Mr. Roussel, as well.

Fellow members, thank you. See you shortly.

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