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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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● (1805)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): We are in session. Thank you, everyone, for coming and all the House of Commons staff for being here late. Thanks to our friends from Australia for being here early. We're trying to get going here.

What time is it there?

Mr. David Elder (Clerk of the House, Australia House of Representatives): It's 8:00 Wednesday morning.

The Chair: Good evening. This is Meeting No. 22 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs for the first session of the 42nd Parliament. This meeting is held in public and is televised.

This is our second meeting of the day. The committee agreed to meet outside its usual time in order to accommodate our witnesses, who are appearing by video conference at 8:00 a.m. in Australia, and from New Zealand in our second hour. This meeting is part of our study of initiatives towards a more efficient and inclusive House.

Our first panel is from the House of Representatives of the Parliament of Australia. We have David Elder, Clerk of the House, and James Catchpole, Serjeant-at-Arms.

I invite the clerk to make his opening statement, and then we'll have some questions and answers.

The floor is yours.

Mr. David Elder: Thank you, Chair. Good morning to you from Australia, and good evening to you in Canada.

My colleague James Catchpole and I have prepared for the committee a few notes on the matters we think you're covering in your proceedings. I didn't propose to make anything much in the way of an opening statement. We're just happy to respond to questions the committee might have.

In the Australian Parliament, particularly in the House of Representatives, we've taken a number of procedural initiatives that I think are very significant. Perhaps they put us at the leading edge of what's been done procedurally in the way of catering to women in a parliamentary jurisdiction. We have a range of more practical initiatives, which I'm sure are of great assistance to women or men who might have young children.

I think we have quite a good story to tell about some of the things that have been done here, and I'm happy to elaborate on those in response to any questions the committee might have.

The Chair: We're trying to study ways to make Parliament more inclusive of all groups, to make it more efficient, more friendly. So you could talk about hours of sitting, the number of days you sit in a year, what days you have votes, maternity leave, child care, or anything else that would make Parliament more efficient and inclusive.

What we'll do is turn it over to each member of the committee.

We're going to start with David Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): This morning we had a very interesting conversation with your counterparts in England. They talked with great enthusiasm about the model they got from Australia on the secondary chamber. This is something we've all learned about in this study. I don't think any of us had ever heard of it before. I was wondering if you could give us a bit of background on it from your perspective as the initiators of this brilliant concept and tell us what we can learn from you about it.

Mr. David Elder: Our second chamber, which is now called the Federation Chamber, commenced in 1994. I suppose the background to the initiative was that there seemed to be a lot of pressure on the time in the House, and it was not unusual for government to be, as we call it, “guillotining legislation” through the House, simply because there wasn't sufficient time for the House to be able to consider it. The whole thought behind what we now call the Federation Chamber, which is effectively a second chamber of the House of Representatives, is that it could run in parallel with the sittings of the House and consider, on reference from the House, a number of matters that would otherwise be considered and debated in the House of Representatives.

For example, the bread and butter of the Federation Chamber is the consideration of government legislation. Instead of the House of Representatives—the main chamber—having to consider all the bills that the government introduces, there is a Federation Chamber that runs at much the same sitting times as the House and can consider bills up until the very final stages.

The Federation Chamber is not an initiator of items of business and is not a completer of any items of business. It receives items of business from the House. It fully considers them, returns them to the House, and then the House finalizes the process. For example, with government legislation, all the bills will be introduced in the House and all of them will have their final third reading back in the House, but the whole middle bit, the consideration both of a second-reading debate as well as what you would call the committee stage of debate, can all happen in the Federation Chamber.

It's very interesting. If you look at the statistics since 1994, the Federation Chamber when it was first established met for around 15% of the time of the House. At one stage in the last Parliament that went up to about 50% of the time of the House. It has perhaps fallen away to the more traditional level of around 30%. As you can see, that's 30% that would otherwise need to have been occupied by the House and is now being occupied by a chamber running in parallel. It's had a hugely significant impact on the way the House can do its business.

● (1810)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

Australia is a rather geographically similar country to ours. Could you just give a bit of background on how MPs get back and forth in Australia, and how often in the year they have to do that? How does that impact your schedule?

Mr. David Elder: Sure. Obviously, the Parliament is based in Canberra, and as you say, Australia, like Canada, is a very big place. Members do a lot of travelling within their own constituencies and some of them have huge constituencies, just as I'm sure there are some huge constituencies in Canada. For example, most of the Northern Territory is one of the constituencies. Two-thirds of Western Australia is another one. They're absolutely huge.

Of course, those members also need to travel to Canberra. We sit about 18 to 20 weeks a year. We tend to sit in two-week blocks at a time, and then there will be a one- or two-week break between those blocks of sittings. We have three longer breaks during the year, which might be six-week breaks.

To be very frank, when members come to Canberra, they want to maximize the time that they can spend on parliamentary business while they're here so that they can get back as soon as they can to their constituencies, where, let's face it, a lot of the real and very important work for them has to happen. We currently have an election going on here in Australia, and that's what it's all about. It's all about being re-elected by your constituents, so you want to pay a fair bit of attention to them.

That's pretty much the context. Members travel to Canberra. They'll travel for the two weeks of sittings. Some members who come from great distances might stay for the duration of the two weeks, but many will return to their constituencies over the weekend between the two sitting weeks.

The House sits from Monday to Thursday. We finish at about 5 p. m. on Thursday, which enables quite a lot of members to get back to their constituencies on Thursday evening. Then they usually travel back to Canberra on Sunday afternoon for sittings on the Monday.

That's the general sort of pattern of travel. There is a lot of travel for all our members because, as you know, it is a vast country. But members are very keen, and the whole sitting pattern has been built around concentrating their time in Canberra and doing as much as they can, rather than having, say, more sitting days dispersed throughout the calendar.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you. That's a good background start.

I know I don't have a lot of time. I have one last question before I hand it over to Ms. Vandenbeld, if there's time left.

There's a concept you have I don't think anybody else in the world has, and I'd love it if you could explain it to our committee. Could you please explain “double dissolution”?

Mr. David Elder: A very long explanation would be needed. The shortened version is that it's a mechanism for resolving differences between the two Houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives, where the Senate has failed to pass legislation on two occasions that the House of Representatives has initiated. It's a mechanism by which those sorts of deadlocks and disagreements between the Houses can be resolved. They're resolved by means of a general election, and unusually it's a general election for the full composition of both Houses. Usually for our Senate, there's only a half-Senate election. At each election period, only half the Senate is re-elected, but with a double dissolution the full Senate is dissolved and there's an election for the full Senate. That's the difference between our two election patterns, and that's quite a novelty for you in Canada, where you don't have an elected upper house.

● (1815)

The Chair: Thank you, David.

Okay, we're going to move on to Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, gentlemen, for being with us this morning.

Just to build on what you had mentioned regarding Friday sittings, are you able to tell us why Fridays are no longer in the sitting schedule? Why was that taken away?

Mr. David Elder: I think it was related to what I've said about the demands that members have. We had a brief experiment a number of years ago with the reintroduction of Friday sittings, but it only lasted one sitting Friday. It was best described as probably a complete debacle. It had nothing to do with the fact it was a Friday, but there were other factors involved. Members do like to return to their constituencies for the weekend. Finishing at 5 p.m. on Thursday is convenient to enable them when travelling to Queensland, and South Australia, and even Western Australia. The Western Australian members can get back to Perth from Canberra on that Thursday evening. I don't think there's any great stomach for Friday sittings any longer, because they don't enable members to get back to where they think their real work is, and that is back in their constituencies.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: That's interesting.

What would be the composition, if you could guess...? I'm guessing by the schedule you just pointed out, and what you said in your last statements, there wouldn't be a lot of MPs bringing their families to the capital.

Mr. David Elder: Sometimes they do. Female members with very young children will be bringing their children to Canberra, because they're still breastfeeding those very young children. During school holidays, if our sittings happen to coincide with school holidays, you'll see probably more families of members in Canberra. There are some entitlements of members that do enable them to bring their families to Canberra for those sitting weeks. They can be funded at the taxpayers' expense to come to Canberra, so they can be with the member. Generally speaking, members would tend not to bring their families to Canberra, with those exceptions I've indicated.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: For those that do, what kind of services are offered in the capital for those with children, such as day care and that kind of thing?

Mr. David Elder: I might get my colleague, James Catchpole, to respond to that. He's the Serjeant-at-Arms and the nuts-and-bolts person who looks after all the welfare of members and so on.

Mr. James Catchpole (Serjeant-at-Arms, Australia House of Representatives): There is a child care centre on site at Parliament House that's open to all members and senators, and also to building occupants. It's provided by a private child care service that's contracted to our department of parliamentary services. That's open essentially year-round, and members bring their children there. We also have several breastfeeding rooms for nursing mothers in the building. We also have family rooms in the building where people can bring their children. We have small playpen areas, TVs, and entertainment for young children and babies. Cots are available.

The commonwealth car service, called COMCAR, is a car and driver service. They have baby seats and baby harnesses, so that members can bring their children to and from parliament. Of course, members can keep their children in their suites.

● (1820)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: In terms of Fridays, you said that when you brought Fridays back for one sitting it was a bit of a debacle. What did you mean by that?

Mr. David Elder: There was a particular context to it.

It was going to be a purely private members' business day, so there was not going to be a question period as there usually is on a sitting day. The then prime minister and other ministers made it clear that they wouldn't necessarily be there for those sittings, and they didn't need to be because the focus was going to be on private members' business.

The then opposition chose to effectively completely disrupt the day. They were opposed to the idea. It was introduced without their support, and so the day was completely disrupted. Because it was private members' business, we had arrangements, for example, so that no votes or divisions could take place on that day. That meant that the chair had no way of dealing with disorder because they couldn't name members and have them excluded from the House on a vote of the House.

It actually just descended into chaos. That would be a fair description of what happened. There were no more Friday sittings after that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: You said the opposition was against it because the Friday sittings were brought in against their will.

Did I hear that correctly?

Mr. David Elder: That's correct. Yes.

The Chair: It's a cautionary tale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Obviously with private members' business, there's a little difference with ours. We have question period and a few other things on Friday. It would be a little different.

How much time do I have?

The Chair: Twenty seconds.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I don't know if I should pull a Christopherson or not. I'll leave it for now. I was going to ask a few more questions.

Thank you very much for your input. I greatly appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have Ms. Malcolmson.

Welcome to the committee.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity.

Thank you to the witnesses.

In noting the length of your sitting days, on Monday and Tuesday you sit until 9:30, and Wednesday you sit until 8 o'clock at night.

We have a concern around families of elected members of Parliament here who want to be home to put their kids to bed. It also impacts on our staff as well. It's not very family friendly when we're working so late and asking our staff to be with us.

Can you comment a bit on the impact around the length of the sitting day and whether you've been able to make any accommodation, both for employed staff and elected members?

Mr. David Elder: Just as a bit of background, there has been a lot of debate and a lot of discussion over quite a long time about the length of sitting hours and sitting days. At one stage we were finishing at 8 p.m. because of this focus on family-friendly hours, and that did last and was quite effective for a while. In fact, going back in time, the House used to sit till 11 p.m., so the reduction to 8 p.m. was obviously very, very welcome. I think the 9 p.m. finish is a bit of a compromise between where we used to be a number of years ago and where we got to in response to this concept of family-friendly hours.

It does relate a little bit to the point that I made about members just wanting, when they're here in Canberra, to get the Canberra business done as effectively as possible. For example, if shorter hours meant that we would then sit on Friday, I think you'd probably find that most members would prefer to be sitting the slightly longer hours and then not have to sit on the Friday to make up the additional hours. It's all a bit of a compromise.

I think the current sitting hours are probably quite a good balance, and they do seem to work quite effectively for members. Don't forget that in terms of members, we only have four members who are actually local members. There are only four members who represent the Canberra area, and those are two senators and two members, so there aren't a lot of members who need to go home and put their children to bed, if you like. Obviously, women who are bringing very young children have issues with the longer hours. I'm not exactly sure what sorts of arrangements they make.

In terms of staff, again, the days are very long. That is true. There aren't really any breaks because we don't have any formal meal breaks in those sitting hours, either, so it does mean a long day for staff. We try to ensure that staff are able to get a break at various times during the day. The 9:30, at least, is a reasonable compromise, I think, much better than 11 p.m., which I think it is starting to get a bit late. These things are all a bit of a compromise. The government, clearly, has a certain number of hours they want the House to sit each week, and then you try to squeeze that into four days and work out how best that's done.

● (1825)

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: What percentage of women do you have elected right now? How many of them actually have young children? Is there any perception or measure that the length of your sitting hours are actually keeping women and women with young families out of standing for elected office in the first place?

Mr. David Elder: Well, the proportion of women in the House of Representatives is around 25%, and it's been around that figure now for a number of years. It climbed up from a much lower level and now it's plateaued at about 25% to 30%. We're just going through an election, so I don't know what the makeup will be in the new Parliament. In the last couple of years, we've probably had half a dozen women, I think, who've had children. That's quite a reasonable proportion of the number of women who are in the House of Representatives. Quite a lot of them are younger women and they are of child-bearing age.

Is it a deterrent? I can't really answer that. My perception is that the women who do have young children are coping well. There's a range of mechanisms that seem to assist them to cope well with the arrangement, and they seem to be perfectly satisfied. For example, we have an election coming, and none of those women are amongst the people who are not recontesting at this next election, so that would suggest that things have been sufficiently satisfactory for them to continue on.

I couldn't really comment particularly well on the impact of that on women generally.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Your day care service for your parliamentarians, does that have a sort of drop-in capability? Do you have any limitations on the ages of children or how flexible the arrangements are for the parents?

Mr. James Catchpole: The child care centre will take children from six weeks to five years. Although some children, particularly of staff members in the building, will be there reasonably long term, there is the capacity for people to drop their children there on an ad hoc basis, which is what would suit members most, and it's [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] building.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Excellent. That's good news.

Can you give us any sense of the take-up on your vote-by-proxy provisions for parents of infants?

Mr. David Elder: At various times it would be used by all those female members who are breastfeeding children. They wouldn't use it, for example, for every division. Sometimes they'll appear for a vote, but at other times they'll give their proxy vote to their whip.

I should emphasize two things about the proxy vote. The member does need to be in Canberra and they do need to be in Parliament House to be able to exercise it. It can't be done remotely. You can't be back in your electorate exercising your proxy vote. Similarly, you can't be at your residence here in Canberra and exercising your proxy vote; you need to be in Parliament House.

It is used very regularly by the women with breastfeeding children.

● (1830)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go on to Ms. Vandenbeld.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much for answering our questions.

The idea of the Federation Chamber, the parallel chamber, has come up a number of times in our committee.

We had the U.K. Parliament speaking to us this morning. They talked about the fact that the parallel chamber there, Westminster Hall, is much more flexible. It's in a horseshoe, ministers attend regularly, and there's much more to-and-fro because of the nature of the speeches.

Can you tell us how it works in Australia?

Mr. David Elder: It's works in a very similar way. It is a much more informal chamber than the House of Representatives. It's a much smaller chamber. Even though all members are members of the Federation Chamber—in other words, all members can attend—we only provide seats for about 38 members in there, because generally there's only going to be a fairly small number of members there.

Certainly, it's a much more intimate chamber and much more confined. It is in a horseshoe shape, but members in fact can sit anywhere in the chamber. They don't have to sit on the usual sorts of opposing sides if they don't wish to do so. Ministers do attend. They'll attend for the final stages of bills. They'll attend for the committee stages of bills. It's meant to be a much more informal way of proceeding than the House. It operates on the same rules as the House, but it's just much more intimate and much more informal.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: You've said that they sit in a horseshoe and can sit anywhere, but do they? Do members from different parties actually sit side by side?

Mr. David Elder: No. Unfortunately, they're terrible creatures of habit, so they do sit on their respective sides. Even our independent non-aligned members will sit somewhere in the middle. I think old habits die hard.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Is there a set time for the speeches? Is there a question and answer period?

Mr. David Elder: There is a set time for speeches. As I said, the rules for the Federation Chamber are really the same as the rules for the House. The speech time limits are the same as the speech time limits for similar sorts of presentations or similar sorts of business matters that operate in the House.

Question time only happens in the House of Representatives. There's no question period up in the Federation Chamber, but in the committee stages of a bill, for example, that might take the form of a question and answer format between a minister and other members.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: You mentioned both the popularity of the Federation Chamber and the unpopularity of the Fridays. Do you think there's a correlation, in that having that parallel chamber made it easier to sit four days a week because there was that additional time for government business?

Mr. David Elder: Well, I think there's no question about that, and at the moment, we're not utilizing the full capabilities of the Federation Chamber. It's meeting about 30% of the time that the House does. Potentially, it could meet 100% of the time. It can meet any time that the House itself is meeting. It can't meet when the House is not meeting. It can't meet before or after the House has finished.

Potentially, there's considerably more time we could use for the Federation Chamber, so the fact that it's not being used suggests that there's not really any need for, say, a Friday sitting. We could easily accommodate that by having more sittings of the Federation Chamber.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: When is private members' business taken care of? I understand that the Federation Chamber is primarily government business. Does it also do other things?

Mr. David Elder: It does do private members' business. Monday is our private members' business day. Part of that happens in the main chamber, so there are two hours of private members' business in the main chamber, and then there are two and a half hours in the Federation Chamber, also on that Monday. So it certainly does do private members' business, but it doesn't exclusively do that; some of that is available also in the House of Representatives. In fact, in the last Parliament, I think, we had about eight hours of private members' business, and quite a lot of that was done in fact in the Federation Chamber. We've actually reduced the amount of private members' business in this most recent Parliament.

● (1835)

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

I think Mr. Graham has a very short question that he'd like to ask.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I just wanted to clarify one point from earlier on. It sounded like you're saying the House sits two weeks on and two weeks off. Is that correct?

Mr. David Elder: That tends to be the usual pattern, but at times there might only be a week's break. At other times we might sit one week, break for a week, and then sit for two weeks, but broadly speaking, the pattern is two weeks on and two weeks off. That's the broad pattern, yes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: What are the longest consecutive weeks you'll generally sit? Right now we're about to have a run of four weeks, for example.

Mr. David Elder: Really we would tend to only sit in two-week blocks. It would be very unusual; maybe at the end of a year we might have an additional week of sittings, or an initial few days of sittings, but I can't recall when we last sat for four weeks in a row. It would be a very long time ago.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'm going to break a whole series of precedents here and share my time with the chair.

The Chair: I'm just going to ask a question David Christopherson would ask. You said you have provisions for families to travel. Here and in the U.K. some members with families don't travel because they don't want to appear in the public that it looks like they're spending a lot of money. Are you confident on how yours works?

Mr. David Elder: Very similarly. It has at various times attracted controversy, and there have been comments at times about some aspects of what they call family reunion travel, and we had a whole range of travel issues that came out last year, and this was amongst those, this family reunion travel. It doesn't seem to create a lot of controversy if it's in fact used to bring family members to Canberra. It is able to be used to take family members to other locations, and I think that's what's caused the controversy. But no, I think members are very sensitive to the use of taxpayers' funds for those purposes, so I think they're very conscious of the need to make sure that this passes the test of public perception as to how that is used.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Richards.

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

I wanted to just take a step back. You had indicated that you sat 18 to 20 weeks of the year, and generally two weeks at a time, and Monday to Thursday. You mentioned the Friday debacle. I don't think we ever did hear the actual sitting times on the Mondays through Thursdays. Could you give me an indication of the sitting hours on the Mondays through Thursdays?

Mr. David Elder: Sure. Monday is 10 a.m. to 9:30 p.m; Tuesday is 12 noon to 9:30 p.m., Wednesday is 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.; and Thursday is 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Those sittings are continuous. There are no formal meal breaks, but I should say that on the Mondays and Tuesdays, between the hours of 6:30 and 8, there are no divisions or quorums able to be called in the House which means that members can actually leave the building to have a break and have a meal between 6:30 and 8 on those two days.

Mr. Blake Richards: It looks like you're sitting in the neighbourhood of about 40 sitting hours in a week, typically. What about question period? What time of day is your question period, and what length of time does your question period run for?

● (1840)

Mr. David Elder: Question time happens each day at 2:00 p.m. and lasts for an hour and ten minutes, so it goes on until 3:10 p.m.

Mr. Blake Richards: When you previously looked at sitting hours, did you look at your question period with a view to changing anything?

Mr. David Elder: Question period has happened at various times over history. It used to happen first up whenever the House would meet. It used to be at 3:00 p.m. It has been at 2:00 p.m. now for some considerable time.

Certainly, there's discussion at various times about whether it should be at a different time of the day, but we all become creatures of habit, so I think 2:00 p.m. is probably a fairly settled time now. I don't know that there's any great desire or intention to move it.

Mr. Blake Richards: It's the same here. We have ours at the same time. I think it has generally worked pretty well for us here.

It looks like your question period is a little longer than ours. That probably compensates for having one less day of question period. You said it has been 2:00 p.m. for some time so I suspect you probably can't comment on why 2:00 p.m. was chosen. If it has been there for some time, I suspect you weren't part of those discussions, but maybe you would be aware of why it was chosen.

Mr. David Elder: It's probably one of those things that gets lost in the mists of time. I suspect it was considered to be the most convenient time. I'm not sure whether there were any discussions about the time. It has been 2:00 p.m. for quite a long time now.

Mr. Blake Richards: Fair enough.

On the Federation Chamber, I want to make sure I was correct about this. It sounded like you were saying that the second reading debates and committee stage occurred in that chamber for all legislation. Was that accurate, or are there certain pieces of legislation that are chosen, and if so, why?

Mr. David Elder: It is only some of the legislation. What we're getting is a sharing of the burden of the House between the Main Chamber and the Federation Chamber. Only certain pieces of legislation are referred to the Federation Chamber. It needs to be done by co-operation, so they tend to be the less controversial matters that might be debated. There is a variety of mechanisms in the operation of the Federation Chamber. This means if there's not co-operation about what's being debated, it's quite easy for an opposition member, or any member, to bring the proceedings to a halt. There have been deliberate efforts to make sure it is a co-operative chamber.

Mr. Blake Richards: Who determines what are the less controversial matters? Is it the Speaker making this decision, or is there a committee of Parliament that makes it? Who decides when something is uncontroversial enough to be in the Federation Chamber?

Mr. David Elder: It's not the Speaker, and we don't have a business committee that operates in the House, so it would be discussions and negotiations between the Leader of the House and usually the Manager of Opposition Business. The Leader of the House would say to the opposition that there are certain items he would like to see debated in the Federation Chamber. The opposition would say they're happy with this, that, and the other, and those would be the matters that would be debated.

If there's not agreement, there is a range of mechanisms to bring the Federation Chamber to a halt—withdrawing the quorum and a range of other things. It really needs to be done by co-operation. Something like 20% to 30% of the House's legislation would be debated in the Federation Chamber.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Good morning to the two of you, and thank you for joining us so early in the morning.

As you're both aware, this committee is looking at creating some policies to ensure that our Parliament is more family-friendly and more inclusive. We truly appreciate your feedback and your candour in answering our questions.

First and foremost, I'd like to know what brought about the changes in your parliament? What was the motivation to bring about the changes that you brought forward?

● (1845)

Mr. David Elder: In terms of the procedural changes, I think there was a clear recognition there was an increasing number of women of child-bearing age, and there were genuine issues for them in addressing the balancing of the needs of looking after their children, with the fulfilling of their obligations as parliamentarians. I think the initiative for the proxy voting, which was introduced in 2009, was very much a recognition that it was important they be able to be seen to participate as fully in proceedings as was possible, whilst being able to continue to breastfeed and look after their young infants.

It is a powerful mechanism, because it means a member doesn't attend in the House for a vote, but has their vote recorded as though they had been attending in the House. That proxy voting is a powerful mechanism, and that's deliberately why it was introduced.

The more recent measure we've introduced, which is to allow them to take their infants into the chamber and for them to be not identified as a stranger—as was the old term—is a further development to say members might need this bit of additional flexibility to deal with whatever particular circumstances they might have. If they have a young family member with them, and suddenly there is a division called, they do have that option to take the infant in with them.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: How many infants would be brought into the House at any given time?

Mr. David Elder: That provision was introduced earlier this year, and it hasn't yet been used. I wonder how much it will end up being used. I don't know what the House of Commons is like, but the House of Representatives chamber, particularly during divisions, is not exactly a child-friendly environment. It's noisy, and lots of things are happening, so I suspect members would probably prefer not to be taking their young children in there. They do have that option, and I think that's the value of the measure the House has introduced.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Do you have any policy or provisions with respect to parental leave for your parliamentarians?

Mr. David Elder: There isn't any provision for parental leave. Members are entitled to receive their salaries and allowances as long as they continue to be members. For example, if they go on holidays, or they become ill and take time off, they continue to be paid their salaries and entitlements. They don't need to apply formally for any recreation leave or sick leave. Similarly, they don't apply formally for maternity leave. There is no formal system for that, and they continue to receive their salaries and entitlements.

Members do seek leave from the House for the period that they might be absent from the House, and that's a formal resolution of the House to give a member leave for, say, maternity purposes or paternity purposes, or because the person is ill, or whatever the particular issue is that a member might have. That means a member is not then obliged to be attending the House at the times the House is sitting.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: What would be the average age of your female parliamentarians?

Mr. David Elder: I wouldn't know, off the top of my head. We do have quite a number of younger female members now, who are in that child-bearing age, but then we also have a number of older female members. I don't know. I haven't done the figures, I'm sorry. We could certainly look at that and provide the committee with information if you'd like.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: That would be great.

My other question is, out of your younger parliamentarians, would they be on their first term or their second term? Have they gone through one election, or two elections?

Mr. David Elder: Some of them would be on their first terms, and others would be on second or third terms. It would vary. Some of them are quite experienced members. As I said earlier, the interesting point is, all of those members are recontesting this current election, so that would suggest some way or other they are dealing in a satisfactory way with all the issues they have to handle in balancing young children and their lives as parliamentarians.

● (1850)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Great.

In the feedback that you've received from the parliamentarians with the changes that you have brought about....

Is my time up?

The Chair: Yes.

We're going to go to Mr. Schmale, but just before we do, I want a clarification on something you said near the beginning. You talked about cars having baby seats.

Which cars are these? Is there a pool of cars for everyone? How does that work?

Mr. James Catchpole: There is. There's a fleet of cars based in Canberra. Members of Parliament are entitled to a vehicle, a driver and car, while in Canberra, mainly to get them to and from the airport, or to get them to wherever they're staying overnight.

It's a fleet of cars called COMCAR, which are provided by the government. They have some, what we would call “people movers”, that can take more than three or four people. They have access to child care seats. We have some stored here at Parliament House, so when a member wishes to book a vehicle, they claim that they need a child seat and that will be provided.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: To go over your typical day on a Thursday, what would the calendar look like? You said that question period is at two o'clock, but how does the rest of the day shape up?

Mr. David Elder: We start off at 9 a.m., and we run with government business from 9 a.m. through to 1:30 p.m.

We then have quite an innovative procedure, which is called “90-second statements”. Between 1:30 and 2:00, members can make a very short 90-second statement on any subject of their choice or interest. That's a very lively and very interesting session. That's a good lead-in to question period, which happens at 2:00 p.m. Question period will run through until about ten past three.

Then each Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, we have a matter of public importance, which is debated for an hour. That's usually a matter that's raised by the opposition, so between say ten past three and ten past four we'll have that matter of public importance. Then from ten past four until 4:30, we have another brief period of government business, whether it be legislation or other government matters.

Then from 4:30 to 5:00 p.m., we have an adjournment debate, and that's an opportunity for private members to raise matters for a period of five minutes.

That's how a typical Thursday would pan out.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I just want to say that any time that the opposition raises an issue, I think that's of utmost public importance.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Ninety seconds for member statements? That's pretty impressive. That must be quite the story that goes on.

In terms of attendance, as the day goes along on a Thursday, would it thin out, or would it stay strong right to the end?

Mr. David Elder: It would tend to stay fairly strong right until, say, 4:30.

When the House goes on to the adjournment debate, you'll often see members starting to leave. There could be divisions in the House right up until 4:30, so members are very conscious of that. They pretty much stay around until probably 4:30, and then you'll hear them starting to depart after that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: In terms of when you said that you went back to Fridays and then it went away, what was the public's reaction? I recognize that there is a difference between what we have on a Friday compared to what you had, which was just private members' business.

Mr. David Elder: It only happened for one day, so it was a new arrangement that was introduced. The House used to sit on Fridays going back historically. There were Friday sittings, and then they changed it to this Monday to Thursday pattern. That was very much built around the members being able to return to their constituencies in good time.

I wouldn't necessarily say that the idea of Friday sittings would never be revisited. It could well be revisited by a government or a Parliament in the future. If it did so, I think it would have to be a balanced day. I think it would have to be more of a standard day rather than just focusing on private members' business.

I do think there's a very strong urge by members to get back in a timely way to their constituencies. Certainly finishing on that Thursday afternoon enables them very much to do that, which wouldn't be possible with the Friday sittings.

● (1855)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Right.

Jumping to the day care question that I touched on last time, are the hours flexible? I think what we heard from the delegations we had before is that the hours weren't flexible enough to match the time the House is sitting. Judging that it's pretty late, you go to 9:30 p.m. or 8 p.m., that's probably pretty late for a young child anyway, but in time if a situation did happen that child care is needed in the evening, is it provided or offered?

Mr. David Elder: The child care centre does stay open until 9 o'clock at night on parliamentary sitting days. It goes from 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. on a sitting day, and it goes from 8 a.m. until 6 o'clock in the evening on a normal non-sitting day. It is open and members can leave their children there if they wish.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): For the hours of the House, are those fixed times or do you tend to have extended hours as well when there are debates late into the night? Sometimes we have emergency debates or other debates that may go until midnight. Is that the case in your Parliament as well?

Mr. David Elder: Very fortunately, one feature of the hours that we have now is that we very rarely have later sittings. They certainly do happen but they're quite unusual. They could be as rare as only one or two times a year now. It's really quite unusual for us to sit beyond those standard sitting times. Part of the reason for that is that we do have the flexibility of the second chamber, to be able to move some business and take some pressure off the House. It's quite unusual for there to be late sittings. If there are, we might go through until 11 o'clock or midnight. It's very unusual to have extremely late sittings these days.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: The times that you mention are quite fixed then.

Mr. David Elder: Yes. The times I mentioned are fixed.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: How about voting? What time of day does voting take place? Can it take place any time of the day, or is there some kind of pattern, routine, or predictability to that as well?

Mr. David Elder: No, there isn't any predictability. It can take place at any time and, frankly, it does take place at any time.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I want to go back to Fridays. You said they were removed historically.

Can you give me a time frame for that, or was it so long ago that you're not aware of it?

Mr. David Elder: It was a very long time ago. It might be 30 years. It's a very long time. I'd have to go back and check. I'm happy to do that, but it would be a very long time ago.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Has there ever been any talk about those times and whether there was any kind of negative public opinion surrounding the taking away of the Friday sittings? I know you mentioned previously that you did it with members being able to serve their constituencies and be able to get back. But was there initially a negative perception to that, or were people very happy that members were going to be in their ridings?

Mr. David Elder: An important issue is that the House didn't lose any sitting time as a result of eliminating the Friday sittings, because they sat earlier. For example, at that time we didn't meet until 2 p.m. on individual days. Now we meet at 10 a.m. on Mondays, we meet at 12 noon on Tuesdays, and we meet at 9 a.m. on Wednesdays and Thursdays. All those hours that the House was sitting on a Friday were absorbed into longer hours on the other four days.

The answer is...I don't know. I'm not sure I was really around at the time the Friday sittings disappeared. I can't recall that there was any particular reaction because it wasn't as though the House was sitting fewer hours.

● (1900)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: What takes place on the day that you start at noon? What takes place before that? Is there anything going on? Is that why you're starting that day at noon?

Mr. David Elder: The reason we start at noon on the Tuesday is that it's in the morning when the political parties will have their meetings. Typically, the parties will have their party meetings on that morning prior to the House sitting.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Are members usually starting their day quite early every day, regardless of what time the House actually starts sitting?

Mr. David Elder: That's right. Typically members would be here at seven, 7:30, or eight o'clock.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you so much for your answers. They were quite direct. I appreciate that.

The Chair: Ms. Malcolmson, you have three minutes.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: I'll come back to the question of who you have elected to your Parliament. I was looking at the international rankings and New Zealand ranks 39th on the number of women they have been able to get into Parliament right now. Australia's ranking is 56th and 61st is Canada's, so you're doing better than us, but we're also at the 25% so it's not a huge surge.

Can you talk a little more about whether you've done any inquiries about what might be keeping women out of running for office? I appreciate your saying that you are encouraged by the take-up, that women who did get themselves to Parliament who have children are willing to run again. That's good.

We're curious about what is keeping women from even considering running, whether they have aging parents and have a disproportionate load around looking after them, or whether they have young children, or are considering having a family. As parliamentarians, are you doing that inquiry around barriers to even standing for office in the first place?

Mr. David Elder: We're not doing it, but it is a very interesting phenomenon that, first, the level of female representation does seem to have plateaued around that 25% to 30% mark and, second, that Australia's rankings have fallen significantly over the last 15 years. I think we were up there at about 20th. Now we're down, as you said, at 56th or whatever.

That's a very unfortunate thing. I don't know the explanation. We haven't done any particular investigation. I might have a variety of theories but I don't know that I'd express them because they are personal theories about what might be happening. It's very unfortunate that we're seeing the plateauing rather than the continuing increase, and that Australia's ranking is falling significantly.

The Chair: Thank you very much to our witnesses for being there early in the morning. This was very helpful. You have unique things that we might look at using. I'm sure our clerk will be in contact with you to get any more details or for you to ask us any questions.

Mr. David Elder: Thank you, Chair, and yes, please, if there are any other queries or follow-ups, please be in contact, and we'll be only too happy to help.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm not going to suspend. While we change the screens, I have some good news on our committee business. A couple of hours ago I talked to Mr. Scheer about the standing order that the Speaker had proposed to us. Remember he had some concerns—but with the wrong paragraph. It was one of the paragraphs on routine business we weren't changing, so that's why it didn't fit with the emergency. He has no concern.

You all have this. I'm just going to pass it out again. The only paragraph that is different in this is proposed paragraph (b). Proposed paragraphs (a) and (c) are the routine stuff that was there before. They were in one paragraph in the existing standing orders; now with the proposal they are in two. The emergency one is in the middle, so just those six lines on page 3 are new.

● (1905)

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): In the case, Mr. Chair, of the appendices, New Zealand and Australia dealt with the same matter. Is that correct?

The Chair: Yes.

The six lines that are being changed are proposed paragraph (b); that gives the Speaker more flexibility when we have an emergency similar to the one we had, or any other emergency.

Mr. Scott Reid: Would it be acceptable to you, Mr. Chair? I was sitting right behind you and Andrew Scheer. I won't say I went to lengths, but I tried not to eavesdrop. As a result, I didn't hear the details of what you were saying.

Would it just be okay if we get confirmation and then deal with this on Thursday?

The Chair: Yes. I'll tell you what his problem was. It was in the first paragraph, where it said “earlier”. It's not related to the emergency at all, but he thought “earlier” didn't apply to the emergency because when they had to call back, it was later. Then, when I pointed out to him that the first paragraph has nothing to do with the emergency....

Mr. Scott Reid: Right. I do recall his raising that concern.

The Chair: We'll just be one minute.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: [*Inaudible—Editor*] to Scheer again?

Mr. Scott Reid: I'll chat with him at our caucus tomorrow. Maybe we can deal with this on Thursday. Assuming it's as straightforward as that, we probably can all just agree to report our recommendation.

The Chair: Sure.

Thursday, hopefully, in very short order we could sneak this in. We could have an emergency any time, so it would be good to have it in place.

I'd now like welcome David Wilson, the Clerk of the New Zealand House of Representatives. We thank you for getting up so early in the morning. I know it will be very interesting for us. We're finding that the parliaments in the Commonwealth all have different, interesting variations. The committee's very anxious to hear how it works in New Zealand. We're trying to improve ours so that it's more inclusive, more efficient, with better sitting times or days, and family friendly for kids, for young mothers, child care—all these types of things. We're very interested.

You could make an opening statement for as long as you like, and then we'll go to questions around the table.

Mr. David Wilson (Clerk of the House, New Zealand House of Representatives): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning from New Zealand. I didn't get up particularly early, it's 11 o'clock in the morning here.

Just to begin, the issue of improving work-life balance for members and staff has been focused on in New Zealand, and I'm aware that it's been an issue also in Australia and the United Kingdom. I think it's become more acute, in New Zealand anyway, because the average age of members has tended to decrease over the last 20 or 30 years, and there's an increasing number becoming parents while they're members. There have been two in fairly recent times in New Zealand. That brings often a few challenges. I also employ quite a lot of staff in their twenties to forties, and about two-thirds of them are women, so parental leave is relatively common for staff. That's a little bit easier to cover by secondments, which opens up opportunities for their colleagues, but it's not so easy for MPs.

I thought it might be useful if I set out the sitting calendar of New Zealand, a little bit about how the Parliament works, and particularly how it takes votes, because that has been a topic of particular interest when thinking about the absence of members caring for young children.

In New Zealand the House sits for 31 weeks of the year. It sits on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday each of those afternoons and also 7:30 until 10 p.m. on Tuesday and Wednesday night. The House sits for 17 hours each week in a normal week. Parliamentary committees meet on the mornings when the House sits. It's very rare for our House to sit at any times other than those 17 hours per week for 31 weeks. It doesn't normally sit during school holidays, and the House takes a long break over the Christmas period, which is of course our summer.

In terms of voting in the House, almost all votes in the New Zealand Parliament are a party vote rather than the traditional division that we see in a lot of Westminster parliaments. A party vote is conducted by the Clerk of the House reading out the names of each party, and the party whip then casts all of the votes for their party. I would call out, for example, “New Zealand National”, and the whip would say “59 votes in favour” or “59 votes against”. I call out “New Zealand Labour” and it's “32 votes in favour” or “32 votes against”. That makes voting very fast. It's a change that we made in 1996 when we moved to a proportional representation system and a break with the old two-party first past the post system that we had.

One of the features of the party vote is that members don't have to come to the chamber to vote. Their whip or another representative of the party can do it for them. That removes a lot of the demands on members, particularly those with young children or other dependants, to necessarily be in the House late at night and be available to attend to vote.

One of the other features that's important, when you think about this in the New Zealand context, is that parties may have up to 25% of their members absent from the precinct and still cast their full allocation of party votes. In other words, 25% of votes can be cast by proxy by members who are absent from the parliamentary precinct. That can also assist members who have to be absent for a variety of reasons.

A few of the other terms of reference that the committee listed and I thought I might cover are around day care facilities. In New Zealand there is a crèche on the parliamentary grounds, but it doesn't work all of the hours that the House sits. It closes at 6 p.m. There is a room near the debating chamber for feeding children, heating bottles, changing nappies, and general care of young children.

In New Zealand there is no parental leave entitlement in law for members of Parliament because they're not employees; however, since about five years ago, the Speaker has been given in our Standing Orders the ability to grant leave to members either for personal reasons or for illness, and he's done that on a couple of occasions with members who have had babies. That's one way that a member can effectively have parental leave on pay and not be required to attend the House in that period.

● (1910)

Political parties may also give a member leave, and they're able to do that through their 25% proxy allowance for voting, which means they can have a few members away and still vote with their full numbers in the House.

We've given some thought to technology and how it might help Parliament, particularly parliamentary committees, to work more effectively and efficiently. This prompts the question of whether members should be required to work such late hours or travel so much. One change we've implemented in the last few years is an electronic committee system that allows members to work from any digital device, anywhere in the country that they can access the Internet.

We use video conferences fairly frequently to reduce committee travel, but we're not considering having sittings or committee meetings by video conference. Members have decided that having to sit together as a team, understanding the risks of confidentiality in committee proceedings, and being sure about who's present to vote are more important than the flexibility that video conferencing might allow. In fact, a few years ago, the House legislated to require members' attendance, and if they were absent without leave, for their pay to be docked accordingly. If anything, in recent years the Parliament has reinforced the idea that members should be present unless they have leave.

As an employer, I allow staff to work flexible hours, to work remotely, to take leave, and still have holidays. For some staff, there is a requirement: they're here when the House sits or they travel with committees, which may be outside normal work hours. This is part of the employment conditions of staff, and they know about all this when they go to work. Members also know those things, but it doesn't mean it remains static. We think about other things we might do to assist.

We've given some thought in New Zealand to the idea of a parallel or an alternate debating chamber, like the Federation Chamber in Australia. We don't currently have a second chamber. We legislated to abolish the Legislative Council in 1950. Though this is a different proposal, the idea of a parallel rather than an upper chamber, there's not been great enthusiasm for it in New Zealand.

One reason is that there is quite a small number of members—121. It's difficult, with all of their other commitments, to stretch to sitting in another chamber concurrently. It's possible that the quality of debate would be diminished in that chamber, as members were rostered to take a turn there, then to return to the main chamber and take a turn there.

It's also not being felt as necessary because almost all of our debates in New Zealand have a fixed time frame of about two hours. An initiative has been introduced, our extended sittings, which are primarily being used as a way to create additional sitting hours, usually on a Wednesday or Thursday morning, to deal with non-controversial business. It's quite different from urgency. A bill under urgency is agreed on unanimously by the business committee, which is a committee of all members of the House. It takes bills through only one stage at a time rather than the multiple stages. It must finish by 1 p.m. on a sitting day.

This deadline has been very successful in progressing business that there's general agreement about across the House, and it's there to address a reduction in the use of urgency. The flow and effect of that has been that urgency often will take the House into sitting on a Friday, later at night, or into weekends. These extended sittings have been a pretty successful substitute for urgency.

Finally, I have a few miscellaneous comments related to making your Parliament more efficient or inclusive. The first point I'd make is that democracy isn't particularly efficient, and parliaments are not very efficient, either. They spend a lot of time scrutinizing the executive. That's an important democratic function. Certainly, we should look for efficiency where we can, but I don't think it should be the driver in this area.

One of our former members has recently called for shorter sitting hours, for the possibility of temporary replacement of members while they're on parental leave, or even the possibility of job-sharing among members. There is a news article she wrote that covers all those things, which I would be happy to share with the committee if they would like to see it.

● (1915)

The Scottish Parliament, as I understand it, sits business hours, and that seems to work successfully there. I believe that in Sweden they allow temporary replacement of members, but I think only for ministers when they join the cabinet.

As I mentioned, the second chamber idea has been discussed in New Zealand, but not currently supported.

I think that in our situation, the mixed-member proportional electoral system has created a more diverse Parliament, and that is likely to continue to increase demand for better, different, and more flexible working conditions, as the group of people who become members of Parliament is more diverse, perhaps, from those who traditionally sought election 20 or 30 years ago.

I think our use of the business committee as a cross-party committee that operates by unanimity has really enabled parties to agree to timetables to allow them to spend time on what matters to them, so the opposition can spend an appropriate amount of time setting out its alternate views against things it doesn't support, but when there is general agreement, it has allowed the House to save quite a lot of time and progress non-controversial or widely supported legislation pretty quickly.

I think the combination of that sort of agreement about House business and the ability to cast proxy votes—and generally there being no requirement for particular members to be in the House—has meant that some of the challenges that other parliaments have faced perhaps haven't arisen here to such a great degree, but it is still very much a work in progress.

That brings to an end my opening statement. I would be happy to take questions from members.

The Chair: Okay, thank you very much. That is very interesting.

We will start with Mr. Lightbound.

Mr. Joël Lightbound (Louis-Hébert, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will share my time with Ms. Sahota.

Thank you, Mr. Wilson, for being here.

I am particularly interested in proxy voting. We have discussed it with your counterpart from the U.K., and from Australia as well, in a way, and you touched upon it in your presentation.

In the U.K., they have a system called “nodding through”, which is a very limited form of proxy voting. In Australia, I gather, it is limited to situations where the member is breastfeeding. In Canada, we don't have proxy voting.

You mentioned that 25% of the members can use proxy voting. Is it limited in any way in terms of what circumstances would make it so that a member can avail himself of proxy voting? Does the member have to be ill? Are there reasons why you could avail yourself?

● (1920)

Mr. David Wilson: Perhaps I should have been a bit clearer. It is possible for one member of a party to cast all of the party votes while he is the only member of that party who is present in the chamber, but 75% of the rest of the members of that party must be within the parliamentary precinct; 25% of the members can be anywhere at all, outside of the precinct. The reasons they are away are a matter between them and their party.

It could be for anything at all. Quite often, it is to attend other business, outside of Wellington, particularly for ministers. It doesn't have to be for illness, child care, or any particular reason that is specified in any rules. It really is up to the party to agree that a member be absent.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Are there procedural safeguards? How concretely does it operate?

Mr. David Wilson: It is very much operated on a trust basis—the word of a whip that they have all of their members present and are able to pass the full number of votes as available to them. The Parliament is always seen very seriously and it probably would be treated as contempt, if a whip did pass votes they were not entitled to. That has happened only once, in my memory, and the party concerned realized that fact before anybody else did, drew the House's attention to it, and actually changed the vote by one as a result.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Thank you.

I will give my time to Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I am also going to follow up on my colleague's questions on proxy voting, because I find it quite interesting.

Have there been any problems with proxy voting in the past, and if so, how did you correct those problems? I am still not quite sure about what the procedure is—whether the member has to sign something off or whether it is just a private agreement between them and their party as to which way they are going to vote. Situations of duress have been discussed in our committee, and there other concerns we have been discussing around proxy voting. Have those come up there?

Mr. David Wilson: They have been discussed, and some concerns have arisen. It's assumed that for party votes, the party whip is entitled to cast all of the votes available to the party. At least they know that some members are absent, so they don't need specific permission from members for every vote to cast their vote. If a member wants to cast a vote differently from rest of their party, they then do give written instruction to the whip to do that on their behalf or they might attend the chamber and do it themselves.

In other situations sometimes there have been errors with proxy votes. Particularly in some instances large parties, if they have a written proxy from another party, will cast the votes for them as well. In New Zealand we have two parties that have only one member each, and another party that has only two members. Those small parties are in coalition with the main governing party. Sometimes they'll give their proxies to the whip of that party if they are absent, and occasionally there's been an error made in the casting of those votes and, when that's been realized, usually by the small party telling the government whip, then they both come to the House and correct their vote.

It's not been tremendously problematic, and I think members have seen that it takes about a minute to cast a vote, and they can spend more time debating and less time voting. When we do have a traditional division, which we do on conscience issues maybe once or twice a year, it seems to take about 10 minutes to call the members to the House and then get them to vote. Members generally prefer this method.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: For the members who are in the House, what is the process of voting? Do they stand and vote or is there technology involved?

● (1925)

Mr. David Wilson: They stand and vote. The Clerk calls out the name of the party while standing. The whip then stands and casts a number of votes and says whether they're in favour of the question, against it, or abstaining, and the Clerk then records those and hands them to the Speaker to announce.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: That's similar to our system here where we individually stand and vote. Has there been any discussion about any technological updates that could be made to make that process faster?

Mr. David Wilson: We've thought about it. There are seven parties in the House at the moment. It takes a few seconds for each of them to cast their vote, and it would be possible to use technology for it. At the moment I think the feeling has been that there's a preference for parties to actually stand and give voice to their vote so that anyone who's watching or listening can hear how they voted. There have not been a great number of errors with voting, either casting them or adding them up. There's not a huge number of members to work with, either. I think at the moment, members are—and I certainly am—quite happy with the voice voting that we use.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Okay I'll pass that over.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'll just take that 30 seconds because I have a very quick question for you. Can you tell us about the allocated seats for the Maori people?

Mr. David Wilson: Indigenous Maori in New Zealand have had the option of one of two electoral rolls. There's the general electoral roll and the Maori roll, and there are a number of Maori seats throughout the country. The number will increase or decrease with the movement in that population. It's increasing and it has been for years now because there's a higher birth rate amongst Maori than other New Zealanders. So only people of Maori descent may vote or stand for election for those seats, and they were introduced very early in the New Zealand Parliament's history as a way of ensuring representation from Maori. There have been calls in recent years to abolish them primarily on the basis that there are actually a disproportionate number of Maori MPs in the House. There are more MPs of Maori descent than there are Maori in the general population... No party really seems to be willing to be the one that abolishes them, so I imagine they are here for the time being.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much for joining us today. We do appreciate your comments.

Just to clarify, I'm having trouble getting my head around this about the proxy voting and having very few people in the chamber at the time of a vote. As a legislator, I can't image anything more important than actually being in the chamber to cast your vote. Can you explain this a bit more? I'm just having trouble with this.

Mr. David Wilson: Many members of the New Zealand public share your discomfort with that. It's possible for the full Parliament to vote with only one representative of each party in the chamber. There are usually a few more than that at times when votes are conducted, but it's certainly far from full. It was a difficult transition for members to make around the mid-1990s when this change was made. Many of our members now, 20 years on, haven't known any other system.

With the variety of other obligations that they have, and a system with a very strong party discipline as well, which has been one of the results of the move to our proportional representation system, it would be very rare for backbenchers, for example, to vote contrary to their party, what you might see in some larger parliaments, in parliaments where members are all directly elected and therefore perhaps not so dependent on their party to have their seat.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: It boggles my mind that, as you said, you could have just the leaders of the parties in there and nobody else. I find that very interesting and confusing because I think if you're elected to do this job, although travel is involved and you're away from your family and we all kind of deal with it in our own way, that is a big part of the job. That is the job to stand in your place and vote, and if you just mail it in, so to speak, I just can't imagine. Maybe it's just me. I don't know.

In terms of proxy voting—I apologize if you have already done it and I missed it—what would be the reason for casting your proxy vote? Apparently you can do it regardless. Again, I'm just trying to get my head around this.

● (1930)

Mr. David Wilson: The party whip is considered to have the ability to cast all votes for their party without a specific proxy from individual members, and if a member wants to vote differently from their party then they would instruct that whip that way, although in that instance they'd be quite likely to go to the chamber and cast their own vote.

The reasons for their absence and the 25% allowance of members who are able to be away from the parliamentary precinct is a matter between the whip and the members of their party. There are not specific reasons provided for in Standing Orders for those matters. Really it is whether the whip will permit them to go, and so they do have to convince the whip. When I talked to the government whip he said everybody except the Prime Minister has to give him reasons for being away. Those reasons are really up to him, and I think it's so that he can weigh up competing requests for absence.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I guess it would be a very civil vote. They just high-five at the end of it and be on their way.

Mr. David Wilson: But vote.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: What was it like in the previous system before you went to proportional? What was the voting like then? Was it the same stand in your place until everyone gets counted?

Mr. David Wilson: No, we would ring the division bells, call all members to the chamber, and they had seven minutes to get there and then they would be locked and they would go out in the lobbies to vote as we would have seen at Westminister. That seemed to take about two minutes for the vote.

As I say, the change was made in 1996. With an increase in the number of parties, and an understanding parties may vote different ways on different questions, it's not guaranteed one side will always oppose everything and the other side will always support it.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Would there be less chance of a free vote for MPs now?

Mr. David Wilson: The number of times they truly have free votes has probably not changed. There are issues in New Zealand that have been identified as conscience issues, really just by convention and tradition, things such as alcohol laws, same-sex marriage, abortion, gambling regulation, are issues on which members have been given a free vote by tradition and they continue to exercise that. In those circumstances where we have a true free vote, members are still called to the chamber with the bells and vote by going into the lobbies, and they will almost certainly not do that along party lines.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: But otherwise it's by party discipline, and you get the nod from above and you're told to vote one way, or proxy it in.

Mr. David Wilson: Yes, you are. Occasionally members do other things. We had a vote on the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement last week in the House. The major opposition party is opposed to it. One of the members, a former trade minister who began the negotiations on it when in government, actually voted contrary to his party, with the understanding that he was going to do that. He voted with the government in that instance.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I'm sorry, I did get off track in terms of the family-friendly initiatives. I just thought it was a little interesting how you had it set up, so I do appreciate the answers. It allows me to better understand. Still, in terms of voting, I think as a legislator, that's your job. It's a large part of your job. It's a privilege to stand in your place and vote, and I couldn't imagine just telling the whip or the party leader, “This is the way I'm voting, and I'll be having lunch”, or something. Anyway, thank you very much for your time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Malcolmson.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: As we are embarking on a democratic reform process in Canada, it's encouraging to me to look at the numbers, Australia's percentage of women in Parliament. I note that the Inter-Parliamentary Union says the top seven major democracies, that are at the top of electing women as a high percentage, are all proportional representation governments. New Zealand is one of them. That's encouraging to me. It follows for me also that, if you have a family-friendly Parliament, you are attracting more women in. If they are feeling supported, then they are more likely to put themselves on the ballot.

I want to track a little bit more some of the things you said in your opening comments around your set-up, because it went fast. How late do you sit in the evening? How late into the night ordinarily is your Parliament in session?

● (1935)

Mr. David Wilson: We sit until 10 p.m.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: You sit until 10, okay.

Mr. David Wilson: That's on Tuesday and Wednesday nights.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Two nights a week it's until 10. All right.

We've been expressing some concerns that, both for staff as well as for parents of young children, this can be a limiting factor as it interferes with their family life back at home. Is that a conversation you're having within your Parliament as well?

Mr. David Wilson: It's a conversation that, yes, certainly members with young children have raised. It's not so much a conversation that's happened around staff. I think that's because they've come into an employment relationship where they've acknowledged that this is something they'll have to do. It affects a relatively small number of staff. We probably have perhaps 10 Hansard staff and three or four clerks working on a night, so it does affect a relatively small number of people. But I'm conscious that this lack of time with family is something that might affect people's decisions to be involved in that sort of work, and it will also affect members' willingness to be involved.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Can you tell us more about your child care availability for parliamentarians? What ages of children? Are parliamentarians able to bring their kids without committing full time?

Mr. David Wilson: I don't have all the details of the parliamentary crèche. There is one within the parliamentary campus, and although anyone is able to go there, the true preference of its role is for children of members and staff of Parliament. It has quite a long waiting list. It takes children from a very young age. I couldn't say exactly what the start is, but I would think it's about six months, through until the time they're able to start school, which is five years of age.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Is that something you'd be able to provide to the clerk, just a confirmation about how young the children are and whether parents are able to drop in just for a couple of days a week?

Mr. David Wilson: Yes, I can, and sorry, I forgot about that part of your question. I believe that's the case, and that would be normal in most child care centres in New Zealand, but I'll check those two things and provide the information to the clerk.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Thanks. That's something that we're finding is a problem for parliamentarians, so that would be helpful for us to have something to compare to.

Can you talk a little bit more about your electronic participation function? Clarify again for what types of parliamentary functions electronic participation is possible, and also talk a little bit about how much it's been taken up and how successful it's been.

Mr. David Wilson: Sure. It's still a requirement if a parliamentary committee wants to meet that the members must be there in person. They have no ability to take part by video conference or teleconference, but the committees do make use of video conference in the way that you are now to meet with people remotely around New Zealand, which is a very small country in comparison to Canada, but still occupies quite a lot of time to travel.

It's much more rare for committees now to travel to other centres unless they receive a very large number of public submissions and would like to be seen to be taking those views on board. Otherwise, they use video conferencing extensively to reduce travel time.

Generally speaking, committees meet on the same days that the House is sitting, although not at the same time, and so the members are usually all together in Wellington, in any case.

They have to be here in person to participate, but all of the documents that members might use, particularly for committees, are available to them electronically anywhere and on any device they use, provided they have an Internet connection.

● (1940)

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: But they aren't able to participate in any parliamentary debate, or voting, or committee attendance electronically.

Mr. David Wilson: No, they're not. They must be present either in the committee room or in the precinct, in the case of the House, in order to vote or to speak.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: That's interesting. Thanks.

What's the longest your Parliament sits at any given time? We just heard from our Australian counterparts that a two-week straight session would be the longest. We have four weeks at a time in some cases. What's the New Zealand experience?

Mr. David Wilson: The usual experience would be to have three sitting weeks. The House would sit Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of each week.

We have a four-week sitting period starting next week which will include the budget. The budget's usually delivered around the end of May each year, and that would be the time the House would probably sit for the most weeks, and potentially also for the greatest number of hours.

I mentioned earlier that extended sittings have to a large degree replaced the use of urgency, but during the budget, particularly if there are measures that might be going to increase a tax or an excise on something, often that will be passed under urgency as soon as the budget's delivered. That would be one of the occasions where the House may well sit from Thursday into Thursday night, possibly into Friday, or even into Saturday, but it's really just about the only time of the year that would happen.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Thanks.

My final question is, has New Zealand ever wished that it had a Senate? This has nothing to do with family. I'm following my neighbour's lead.

Mr. David Wilson: We had one until 1950, at least a sort of council, it was called, and it was abolished by the members of the Legislative Council in 1950.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Has anybody ever expressed deep regret over that?

Mr. David Wilson: No. Certainly not the public....

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Thank you.

Those are all my questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Vandenbeld.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I apologize if you already said this because I heard you say it goes until 10 p.m. on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. What about the other days of the week?

Mr. David Wilson: On a Thursday, the House sits from 2 p.m. until 6 p.m., which are the same afternoon sitting hours it does the other days, but it doesn't sit on Thursday night usually. The House doesn't sit on a Monday or a Friday in a normal week either. It could and it will, if it sits under urgency, but generally it doesn't.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: You said there were some special hours that could be added in the mornings on Tuesdays and Wednesdays if there was a need.

Mr. David Wilson: That's correct. It's what's called an extended sitting, which is an initiative that was introduced only a few years ago in response to a concern about the amount that urgency was used to pass legislation through multiple stages, or even to enact it.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Are those extended sittings at the initiative of the government? Is that on consensus? How do you determine to go into an extended sitting?

Mr. David Wilson: There are two ways of doing it. The usual way is by near unanimity on the Business Committee. The vast majority of members will give agreement, and the Speaker will judge if there is near unanimity. It's possible for the government to go into an extended sitting on a government motion, but it's quite reluctant to do that because generally the business that is dealt with under extended sittings is something that most or all parties agree to. It's been used also exclusively for passing the Treaty of Waitangi settlement bills, which are about redressing indigenous Maori grievances over land confiscation in the 1870s. There's wide political support for doing that, and so parties generally all consent to do it, and that's been a very useful way of progressing that legislation that has wide agreement and that's not controversial for the majority of people.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

I may have misheard, but you said something about all debates having a fixed time frame of two hours. Can you explain that?

● (1945)

Mr. David Wilson: Debates on a first, second, or third reading of a bill are limited to two hours. Twelve members will get a call of a maximum of 10 minutes each. They're able to share those calls, and in some cases the party might take two five-minutes calls instead. The maximum time for those debates is two hours. The committee of the whole House stage, where a bill is debated and considered in detail between the second and third readings, doesn't have a time limit. That one can run for a significant period of time, as members debate the details of the legislation. With that exception, virtually everything else has some sort of time limit specified in the Standing Orders. Some of those limits are quite long. The budget debate, for example, has a time limit of 13 hours. The debate on the address from the throne at the beginning of Parliament I think is 15 hours. While some of those time limits are quite long, they do give members certainty over when something is going to occur and how long it will take.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: What about the timing of the votes? Are the votes also as predictable?

Mr. David Wilson: They're fairly predictable in that they'll always occur at the end of the debate. Some debates do progress more quickly, although they have a maximum time limit, say, of two hours. If it's something there's general agreement on, it may only take an hour and a half. There will always be a whip from each party present in the House ready to vote at any time. The only exception, as I said, would be those very small parties of just one or two members who are not able to maintain a continuous presence in the House.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: What about private members' business, how many hours are allotted to that?

Mr. David Wilson: One Wednesday every fortnight is for members' business. That will be for consideration primarily of members' bills every two weeks.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

Mr. David Wilson: All members who are not ministers are able to introduce bills, and they'll be debated every second Wednesday effectively. The only thing that would interrupt that would be the delivery of the budget. If that was to occur in a week where it would be a members' day, then the members' day would wait until the following week.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: You referred to a Business Committee. Is this a committee of all parties? Is it similar to our Board of Internal Economy? What is the purpose of the Business Committee?

Mr. David Wilson: It is a committee of all parties. Every party is entitled to have one member on it, regardless of their size. Unlike most of our committees, which would have specified members named as members of the committee, this one doesn't, and any one member of a party is able to attend. Usually it will be a senior member or a whip from each party. The government Leader of the House will attend as well and talk about House business. It's chaired by the Speaker, and it makes decisions about the agenda for the House, the Order Paper, and timetabling. It has all parties present, and sometimes I'll use it to discuss possible procedural changes and try out innovations in the House. It meets every week at the start of the same week, and it operates on the basis of near unanimity. The Speaker will judge if he has almost every party in agreement, which means the large parties. If they disagree with something, that near unanimity won't be achieved.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate your being here with us.

We've picked up bits and pieces of this as we've gone through it, but I want to make sure I've got it all straight here. Let me ask you to run through it all again, or for the first time in some cases.

What is the number of sitting weeks in your parliament?

Mr. David Wilson: There are 31 through the year.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Are those spread out over the course of the entire year?

Mr. David Wilson: That's right. It's usually in blocks of three weeks at a time. Sometimes there is a four-week block. There's a large break in December and all of January, which is the New Zealand summer.

● (1950)

Mr. Blake Richards: You said you sit Tuesdays through Thursdays, generally. Was I correct when I heard on Tuesdays and Wednesdays it's from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m., and then on Thursday it's from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.?

Mr. David Wilson: That's correct.

Mr. Blake Richards: What about question period? What time of day does that happen and for how long?

Mr. David Wilson: Questions are held at 2 p.m. as soon as the House sits each day. There are 12 questions to ministers. It usually lasts about an hour, but it doesn't have a time limit. There are rules that questions must be short, just long enough to ask a question, and the answer is also supposed to be brief. It's sufficient to ask for parts of the member's question, but no longer. It's not an exchange of speeches or points of view. It is a short question, just a couple of lines of text, followed by an answer, and then the member has the ability to ask supplementary questions following the primary answer.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. It's 12 questions with a supplementary, so that's 24 questions all together with the supplementals. Is that correct?

Mr. David Wilson: No. They can have multiple supplementary questions. A party has a weekly allocation of supplementaries that is allocated proportional to their size in the House.

Mr. Blake Richards: There's been a bit of a discussion about members with young children. How many members do you have right now with young children? That would be with young children who would be nursing, mainly, but maybe for those with young children under the age of five or six, as well.

Would you know?

Mr. David Wilson: I would have to estimate.

I know of two with children who are nursing at the moment. I would guess around half of the members have children who are still dependent on them.

Mr. Blake Richards: Particularly for members who have children, and who are nursing, what sort of accommodations are made there for them?

Mr. David Wilson: There's a room next to the debating chamber that has been designated as a parent's room for members where they're able to feed or change their children. They can have a bassinet or a cot in there for the child to sleep in. It is used particularly with members. Members can also have a family member, or a staff member, who can go into that room and look after the child while they're speaking in the chamber. It's used usually while a member is speaking—at least they want to be—because the rest of the time they're not required to be in the chamber because of the proxy voting.

Mr. Blake Richards: A few of my colleagues have done this, so I'm going to stray a little off topic.

I noticed in doing a bit of reading prior to your appearance here that fairly recently your Prime Minister had been thrown out of your Parliament for the day, I believe it was. Upon reading further, I understood that it wasn't the first time that it had happened. I don't think it was the same Prime Minister. I'm curious about that.

I recently had raised a point of order regarding our Prime Minister and some of the behaviour we saw from him during question period. He wasn't thrown out of Parliament. In fact, I will give him credit, his behaviour since the time I made the point of order has improved, so that was a positive thing, and I hope it will stay that way.

I'm curious as to what precipitated the Prime Minister being thrown out of Parliament. It must have been quite a situation.

David Wilson: Yes, and you're right; I think most Prime Ministers sitting for a reasonable period of time in New Zealand would have been thrown out of the chamber at least once.

In fact, the current Prime Minister, since he's been Prime Minister, which has now been eight years, hasn't been made to leave the chamber. Before that, when he was an opposition member, he did go out a few times. In this instance, he was required to leave because Standing Orders say that when the Speaker is on his feet and calling for order, members must sit down and be quiet. The day before that, the Speaker had warned him about the same thing. He tends to get up, turn his back to the Speaker and then address the rest of the chamber. Sometimes when the Speaker is on his feet, the Prime Minister says that he can't see him. He did that three days in a row. He had been warned the day before, and the Speaker did that for the same reason he would ask any other member to leave, which was just defying the Chair.

● (1955)

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you very much. I appreciate your diligence on that.

The Chair: That will help our family-friendly Parliament. Anyone who is not family friendly will be thrown out.

David.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

I don't have a lot of questions.

Your opening statement is among the most thorough we've had yet at this committee. I must congratulate you for putting the word "nappies" in Canadian *Hansard* for the first time. I checked quickly and it's never been said here in the House before.

You talked about proportional being used in New Zealand, and I can only imagine how having two types of MPs has interesting impacts on family and riding relationships. As I understand it, in New Zealand, it's an MMP system, so some MPs are elected in ridings and some are on lists. How does that affect how much time they spend in Parliament versus in their ridings? For that matter, what do list MPs consider to be their ridings?

David Wilson: That's a good question.

Every list member would consider themselves to have a riding or an electorate, though they're not directly elected by it; they're elected by the nation at large. All of them will stay in office in some part of the country, which would usually be where they live, and so most cities and towns will have two members' offices, the first being that of the electorate or riding, of the person who holds that seat, and the second being that of the list MP who is based in that area.

The only requirement is that the second member make it clear to everybody on their signage and business cards, etc. that they are a list MP based in a certain area and they are not the MP for that area. Both kinds of members would spend the same amount of time in Wellington, and, I would think, the same amount of time in their offices out in the rest of the country.

There's really no difference in what they can do, or how they would behave and go about business in Wellington. I think list members in particular have acted to minimize their difference out in the population at large as well.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: From a technical point of view, when MPs in New Zealand are travelling back and forth to Wellington from their ridings, how is that accounted for? For example, here we can bring our family, our dependants, but each one takes a travel point and we have a limited number of travel points. How does it work in New Zealand?

David Wilson: The members themselves are free to travel as much as they like within New Zealand. That is bought and paid for, for them, by the parliamentary service. They're entitled to bring their family members to Wellington a certain number of times a year. I'll have to check that number and let you know what it is. I think it's about 10 times a year, but I might be wrong about that, so I'll check it. They are able to bring them, but there's a limit on the number of times they can do that without paying for it.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: New Zealand is a two-island country, so I'm guessing most MPs come by aircraft, rather than by any other means. What's the breakdown?

David Wilson: That's correct. Seventy-five per cent of the population live in the North Island, well into the southern point of that island, so the vast majority of members also live there, and they do fly. Auckland is the most popular city, with a quarter of the country's population, so it has a large number of MPs, and almost all of them, except perhaps eight to 10 members based in Wellington, would fly in, and then the locally based ones would drive.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: How many members are there in the New Zealand Parliament, and how many are constituency versus list? Because of the way the lists are topped up, is it consistent from one election to the next?

Mr. David Wilson: At the moment there are 121 members in the House and the number does vary slightly because the list does top up those numbers. We are a party. Perhaps one is a seat but one is a very small share of the total national vote. So we had 122. We currently have 121. It's possible, but very unlikely to have less than 120. The mix is 70 elected MPs, 50 list MPs.

● (2000)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You mentioned earlier that anyone who's not a minister can put forward a private member's bill. Does New Zealand have parliamentary secretaries to ministers, and if so, can they submit bills, PMBs?

Mr. David Wilson: At the moment there's only one. There's a parliamentary undersecretary, as they're called, and that's even lower than a parliamentary secretary. That person is able to submit bills. He is not considered a minister so he is not able to ask questions at question time or introduce legislation in his own right but he can introduce members' bills, and in fact he has.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I appreciate your answers. I'm out of time. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're officially over the question time, but does anyone have one last question?

Go ahead.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Thank you, Chair.

I want to come back to electing women in parliament, which is good for families, and also proportional representation. I got to travel to Norway a few years ago where they rank 15th in the world for the number of women elected to Parliament. Forty per cent of their Parliament is female, and they also elect using proportional representation. The observation that I had from the embassy representatives who had organized our delegation was expressed so diplomatically. They said, "We've seen your parliaments and legislatures in Canada, provincially and federally, and ours is nothing like yours."

So I'm curious—your prime minister being turfed from the House notwithstanding—about the decorum and the sense of co-operation within your Parliament. Because we hear that the perception that you have to be thick-skinned in order to stand for office is something that may dissuade either women from standing, from being willing to put themselves forward, or parliamentarians, in general, who have small children or sensitive family members.

Do you have any comments on the tone and how that affects recruitment?

Mr. David Wilson: Yes, I would imagine that would have some effect on the willingness of some people to seek election, or of their families to want them to be involved in it. At question time, certainly, it's very loud and confrontational, and much more so from members in the chamber than for people who can hear a broadcast of it because only one microphone is live from the broadcast. But when you're in the room, I know from my own experience, it's very loud and there's quite a lot of calling back and forth across the chamber.

I think the sense would be that would have some effect here, that members do need to be quite thick-skinned, and I think parties would generally agree with that.

The Green Party, which only has list MPs, has a policy of having 50% male and 50% female membership on their list, so they alternate. They do have a gender-balanced party in the House. No other party of a larger size does have that, and I think the total representation of women at the moment is around 33%, 34%. It has stayed that way for quite a long time, and I suppose the feeling members have had is that the party list is the way to address that, that parties wanting to appeal to the widest possible electorate will ensure that all voters are well represented on the list. I don't think that has been a reality, though, because while it may be true in theory, if you elect people who are actually willing to put themselves forward and you think are good candidates, then that theory probably isn't going to achieve the results you might want.

The Chair: Thank you.

The very last question from our family-friendly study this year is from Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much.

When you made changes to your voting system, was that done unilaterally by the party in power or was it done by a referendum consulting the people?

Mr. David Wilson: It was neither of those options. It was done unanimously by all parties in the House, and they do a review in every three-year Parliament of all Parliament's rules and make quite frequent adjustments to them, but it's always done unanimously, with the party realizing they're not going to be the government forever.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for taking this time out of the morning there in New Zealand. I'm sure you can be back and forth with our clerk if either of you have any questions. We really appreciate this. It's been very helpful.

● (2005)

Mr. David Wilson: You're welcome. We're pleased to speak to you.

The Chair: We stand adjourned.