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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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• (1205)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good afternoon.

Welcome to the 47th Meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The meeting is being televised.

The subcommittee on agenda and procedure met last Thursday and recommended in its fifth report that today's meeting with the Minister of Democratic Institutions, the Hon. Karina Gould, be an hour, followed by committee business.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the subcommittee report?

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): I'd be happy to adopt it as long as we are clear publicly on something that I just clarified with you and the clerk privately, which is that this would not have the effect of extinguishing the committee's resolution adopted on November 29 that the minister come in for two hours to answer questions regarding MyDemocracy.ca and the government's planned agenda for electoral reform.

The Chair: Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): I will respond from the government side with respect to that. We would be prepared to provide the minister for a second hour.

Mr. Scott Reid: That would make me happy. My understanding is that we would regard this as being the first of the two hours.

Mr. Arnold Chan: That's correct.

Mr. Scott Reid: That sounds good to me.

The Chair: Okay. Does the committee agree to approve the subcommittee report?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Minister Gould is accompanied today by two officials from the Privy Council Office, Ian McCowan, deputy secretary to cabinet for governance; Natasha Kim, director of democratic reform; as well as by the parliamentary secretary, Andy Fillmore.

Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Colleagues, do you want to adopt this subcommittee report or do you want to do that under—

The Chair: We already did.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Okay.

I also want to raise at this time an issue that I've already raised informally with my colleagues.

I would like to take a seven-minute round, colleagues, to ask a series of questions on cybersecurity with respect to the minister's mandate letter. However, I'm proposing that the second Liberal seven-minute round be punted to our final five-minute round and that the five-minute round be moved to where the seven-minute round would be. I would ask that we go in camera for my seven minutes at the very end of the questioning of the minister, to be as minimally disruptive to the process as possible.

Would that be acceptable to my colleagues?

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Provisionally, I think it is. The obvious question is what are the planned rounds of questions in a one-hour spot?

The Chair: It's just the regular rounds.

Mr. Scott Reid: So five minutes....

The Chair: It's seven minutes for the first four. The second round is five minutes for four and then it's three minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Do we have any objection to that, Blake?

That sounds fine.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thanks, Chair.

Mr. Chan was kind enough to give me a heads-up ahead of time to let me know what was coming. The only thing I would say that Mr. Chan left out of what he had mentioned to me was that if, for any reason at all, we believe this doesn't need to be in camera, that it's not a security question that requires us to stay in camera, that we would get back out right away. With that proviso and that understanding of erring on the side of caution when it comes to security issues, it makes all the sense in the world. However, if it's not what it appears to be, then it's understood that we would jump back out and be back in public and deal with those issues in the public domain.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Agreed.

The Chair: I'll now turn the floor over to the minister.

Thank you for coming, Minister. You have 10 minutes.

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Democratic Institutions):
Okay, great.

Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Good afternoon everyone.

I am delighted and honoured to be here with you today.

[*English*]

Good afternoon, and thank you for your invitation to appear today.

It is an honour to be before the committee this afternoon. I was appointed minister just four weeks ago today, and this is my first appearance as a minister before a committee of the House. I'm delighted that it's with all of you today.

I would like to introduce my parliamentary secretary, Andy Fillmore, member of Parliament for Halifax, and my deputy minister, Ian McCowan, who is the deputy secretary of governance of the Privy Council Office. Also joining us are Allen Sutherland, assistant secretary to the cabinet, and Natasha Kim, director of democratic reform.

I am pleased to be here before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs with its valuable knowledge and insights on many of the electoral matters mandated to me by the Prime Minister. I have a deep respect for committees and the important role they play in our Parliament. I'm eager to engage, consult, and work with the committee to improve Canada's democracy. The studies you conduct and the years of experience you bring to the table are a few of the many reasons I will particularly value working with all members of this committee and hearing your contributions to these files.

I would like to focus my remarks today on my new mandate letter, as well as on Bill C-33, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act. If it pleases the House to adopt the bill at second reading, I would, of course, look forward to returning to this committee to discuss it in more detail.

I will turn now to my mandate letter. As you know, my overarching goal, as Minister of Democratic Institutions, is to strengthen the openness and fairness of Canada's public institutions. I have been mandated to lead on improving our democratic institutions and to restore Canadians' trust and participation in our democratic processes.

[*Translation*]

I have been mandated to lead on improving our democratic institutions and to restore Canadians' trust and participation in our democratic process.

[*English*]

In terms of my specific mandate, allow me to begin with the topic of electoral reform, a topic on which I know there are strongly held views. Much has been said about this already.

Our government consulted broadly with Canadians on electoral reform over the past year. Any proposed changes to the foundational values of how we elect our representatives should have the broad

support of Canadians. More importantly, Canadians would expect to be consulted before embarking on a change of this magnitude.

Public consultations came in many forms. In reaching out to Canadians, there was tremendous work done by the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, several members of which are here today; by members of Parliament representing all parties in the House; by the cross-country ministerial tour; and through the government's engagement of over 360,000 individuals in Canada through Mydemocracy.ca.

In fact, the consultations launched on electoral reform make it one of the largest and farthest reaching consultations ever undertaken by the Government of Canada. This conversation was at times spirited, and it was a conversation in which many had legitimate and passionate views. I respect and thank each and every Canadian who participated in these discussions on something as fundamental as how we choose to govern ourselves.

I appreciate the diversity of views. It was our responsibility to listen to what Canadians said in these consultations and to take that into account.

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

A clear preference for a new electoral system, let alone a consensus, did not emerge from these consultations.

Without a clear preference for change, much less a specific preferred alternative system, a referendum could be divisive and not in Canada's interests.

[*English*]

Consequently, changing the electoral system is not within the mandate the Prime Minister has given me. We listened to Canadians and made a difficult decision, but I am confident it was the responsible one. The first past the post system may not be perfect. No electoral system is, but it has served this country for 150 years and advances a number of democratic values Canadians hold dear, such as strong local representation, stability, and accountability.

My job is to strengthen and protect our democratic institutions. We remain committed to improving this country's electoral system in many ways, which I will turn to now. There is much useful work to be done to improve Canada's democracy, and I look forward to working with the committee on this important responsibility.

First, I would like to highlight new items in my mandate letter to strengthen and protect the integrity of the democratic process. As we have seen globally, there is increased concern that Canada's electoral process could be susceptible to cyber-attacks in a bid to destabilize Canada's democratic governments or influence the outcome of an election. We must guard against this.

In ensuring the integrity of our democratic institutions, I have been mandated, in collaboration with the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, to lead the government of Canada's efforts to defend the Canadian electoral process from cyber-threats.

This will include working with the Communications Security Establishment to analyze risks to Canada's political and electoral activities, and to release this assessment publicly. As well, I intend to ask CSE to offer advice and information to Canada's political parties on best practices they may wish to consider when it comes to cybersecurity.

As I've previously stated, this is about assisting parties to protect themselves. Ensuring the safety of our democratic system is a non-partisan issue. It is vital that we protect Canada's democratic infrastructure from cyber-threats. I hope you will agree that we must protect our democracy from emerging threats.

I've also been mandated to introduce legislation to examine and tighten the rules surrounding fundraisers attended by the Prime Minister, ministers, party leaders, and leadership contestants.

[*Translation*]

Federally, Canada has among the strongest and most stringent political financing rules in the world. Nonetheless, it is essential that Canadians continue to have confidence in our political finance and fundraising laws, and we must seek ways to ensure such confidence in the strength of our system is regularly enforced.

[*English*]

One such way to do that is to bring even more light to fundraising activities. We believe that Canadians have a right to know even more than they do now about political fundraising. We will take action to ensure that fundraisers are conducted in publicly available spaces, advertised in advance, and reported on in a timely manner after the fact. These changes will increase openness and help ensure that Canadians have continued trust in their political financing regime and in their political system generally.

I look forward to discussing with other parties any additional ways we can enhance transparency in the fundraising system. This is an area where all parties have an interest and experience to bring to bear.

I will also work on recommending options to create an independent commissioner to organize political party leaders' debates, reviewing the limits on the amounts political parties and third parties can spend during and between elections, proposing measures to ensure that spending between elections is subject to reasonable limits, as well as supporting the president of the Treasury Board and the Minister of Justice in reviewing the Access to Information Act. I am confident you share a desire to work on these important matters with our government.

In addition, I am the lead minister in relation to Senate reform, including the government's non-partisan, merit-based Senate appointments process to fill Senate vacancies.

I am also responsible for working to pass amendments to the Canada Elections Act to make the Commissioner of Canada Elections more independent from government and to work to repeal the elements of the Fair Elections Act that make it harder for Canadians to vote.

In terms of this final point, as you know, the government has already introduced Bill C-33, which proposes seven measures in this regard. This bill is designed to increase voter participation by

breaking down barriers to voting while enhancing the efficiency and integrity of Canada's elections. These elements are at the heart of our electoral system and I am pleased with the legislation that has been put forth. Should the House refer Bill C-33 to committee after second reading I would look forward to working with the committee in its study of this legislation.

While not a specific item in my mandate letter, as I noted earlier, it is my overarching mandate to strengthen and protect our democratic institutions. That includes continually working to improve the Canada Elections Act and the administration of elections. I am very pleased that this committee is charged with the same goal particularly in relation to your current study into the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations report following the 42nd general election. I know this committee has been working quite diligently on this report, which includes 132 detailed recommendations to further modernize and strengthen the integrity and accessibility of our electoral system. Your work will help inform the government in the next step of modernizing our electoral system. I welcome your insights into these matters and improving the Canada Elections Act with you.

I'm eager to begin the hard work necessary to achieve these mandate commitments given to me by the Prime Minister.

• (1215)

[*Translation*]

Canada's democracy remains the envy of the world, but we should never become complacent. Our system is trusted by Canadians and renowned worldwide because we are constantly working to improve it.

[*English*]

I hope I can count on your expertise and your contributions on Bill C-33, on your contributions and expertise on the recommendations from the CEO of Elections Canada, and as I continue to work to fulfill the mandate set before me.

Thank you again for inviting me here today. I look forward to working on my mandate, I look forward to working with all of you, and I would be happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll start our first round of seven-minute questions with Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you, Minister Gould, for being here today. Congratulations on your new role.

You spoke a little about your mandate to work with the defence minister and the Minister of Public Safety regarding cyber-attacks on our electoral system. What are some of your main worries and what areas will you be focusing on? Why do you think this is an important part of your mandate?

I also want to highlight a bit of what we heard today at a youth conference we were both at. I thought that was quite interesting. There was one youth who came up at a Canadian universities event and spoke a little about algorithms and news that is fed to us online. I think that's been a concern. It's been brought up in a lot of other committees that I sit on. It influences the way we think when we're targeted by websites and presented the fake news that we've been hearing a lot about. What are some of your thoughts on this and how it relates to your mandate?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you very much for the question.

I think it's a very important and timely question to be asking. It has been four weeks now. I haven't had the opportunity at this point to sit down with CSE. We've had some preliminary discussions, but that's something that will be coming in the near term in terms of what this looks like and what the breadth of the mandate will look like.

My mandate letter talks specifically about political parties and ensuring that the Communications Security Establishment is analyzing, monitoring, and reviewing what the potential threats to political parties' information systems could be and then providing information as to how they can protect themselves.

It's really important that we do this right and that Canadians have the confidence that this is not about the CSE going in and looking at political parties' information systems, but rather about them providing an overview about best practices on how they can protect themselves and identify potential emerging threats.

The conversation you raised this morning was in regard to a young man who works in artificial intelligence who was talking about the fact of how news sources in many ways, in some respects, can be targeted to individuals based on their preferences and the silo effect of how we consume media and information as citizens. His concerns were about how we ensure that we get a diversity of views that are reaching many individuals.

I think that is definitely an area we need to be considering and looking at. It's something that I'm definitely concerned about, but it's a question of how we as a government, we as parliamentarians, and we as political leaders engage with this. I think in Canada we have one of the highest per capita uses of Facebook, and we know that Facebook and other social media will push information to you based on your own preferences. So how do we ensure that people are getting a diversity of viewpoints to make informed choices, but also have the digital literacy to be able to look at these and understand where they're coming from and make those informed choices?

It's a really important conversation to be having. It's something to start thinking about. As political leaders, it's incumbent upon us to make sure that we're doing what we can to ensure people have that access to diverse points of view and different sources of information. I think it's a really important thing.

It will be about us determining what is the breadth of democratic institutions in Canada and does that include the media, and then how do we work in partnership with the media for them to have access to those tools as well. That's something that I think will come in time. Of course, I welcome points of view and ideas or thoughts from either this committee or other members of Parliament on that.

• (1220)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you. It was definitely a big concern for him and the other youth sitting at my table.

I'm going to share my time, if there is any, with Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): How much time do you have left?

The Chair: There is two and a half minutes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I want to get into process a bit. You're aware that the procedure and House affairs committee has been studying the Chief Electoral Officer's report for some time now. I think if we look at how much is left, we have a good 20 or 30 meetings left on it, and possibly more. There's an awful lot to do.

It's been in camera. I can't go into the details with you, but I know that it's within your mandate and your job to bring in more legislation on democratic reform, on changes in general.

I wonder if you can give us a sense of timelines, if you have any idea of when you're expected to do stuff and if it be helpful for us to get our reports to you, or if you want us to get interim reports out. Do you have any comments on that?

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes. Thank you very much.

I appreciate that the committee is currently reviewing the recommendations from the CEO of Elections Canada following the past election. I appreciate that there are 132 recommendations, so this is quite a big task nonetheless.

I really look forward to receiving your input on those in terms of the direction as we move forward. Of course, we have an election in three years. We don't want to push it too long, because we want to make sure that those recommendations can get in ahead of time and with enough time for Elections Canada to implement those.

If there is a possibility for interim reports, which I believe the chair had maybe commented about in *The Hill Times*, I would welcome that. The depth and the breadth of the study you're undertaking is very valuable.

I hope I can count on you to get those to the public and to me in a timely fashion and that we can get to work on implementing legislation that will be in effect for the next election. I know that for many members of this committee it's very important that we make sure we get this done, so that ahead of 2019 we don't face some of the issues we faced in 2015.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Reid, go ahead.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for being here. Thank you, as well, to your very competent staff and your parliamentary secretary; it's good to see you here.

Thank you also for making time to meet with me on Tuesday of last week.

I want to ask you a number of questions. I submitted a letter to you yesterday to assist you, recognizing that some of these things are matters on which you might not be prepared if you didn't have a bit of advance time to work on them. I apologize for the fact that they came to you with only 24 hours' notice, but we only learned you'd be here Friday afternoon—not quite after work hours, but after I had departed, at any rate.

I have a series of five questions. I might just read from the list and then ask you them. If you don't mind, I'll start with the third question. These all relate to the MyDemocracy.ca survey or instrument. The third question on that list is, has the government retained or destroyed the data produced by responses to the field test and the final MyDemocracy.ca survey?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you so much.

I appreciate the fact that you sent the questions so we could be prepared for them. I have brought two technical staff with me today who are prepared to answer these for you.

• (1225)

Mr. Ian McCowan (Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet (Governance), Privy Council Office): Mr. Reid, I'll start, and Ms. Kim can add in as she sees fit.

In terms of the data elements, Vox Pop still has the data set. There are two data elements that have been generalized, the year of birth and the postal code, simply because the analysis around those has already been done. Other than those two elements, the data set is with Vox Pop.

I'm not sure if Ms. Kim has anything to add.

Ms. Natasha Kim (Director, Democratic Reform, Privy Council Office): No, I don't, other than to say that the final report has been published on the website.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. This allows me to move to questions four and five, which were really alternatives. Given that the data hasn't been destroyed, will you commit to sharing it with Parliament or with the general public, while obviously excluding information that could be connected with specific individuals?

Mr. Ian McCowan: Mr. Reid, you've just gone to the heart of the issue. You'll be aware from the Vox Pop survey and final report that the government has indicated publicly that they would only be receiving data back in aggregate form. That has been clearly stated.

We just got your request yesterday night, so we are going to have to review it, but it's going to be reviewed in the context of what I just said, namely that there is a commitment on the part of the Government of Canada to get only aggregate data back in this exercise and, obviously, to ensure that all privacy requirements are met. What I would say, if it's satisfactory, is that we'll take that one away. We just got it last night. The concern is the one that you yourself have identified.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right. The fact that the minister is coming back for a second meeting will allow us to deal with this further. We'll pursue it at that time. Let's just leave it there.

I'll turn now to question number one. Did the government exclude from the final MyDemocracy.ca survey any questions that were included in the November 2016 field test for the survey or that were

recommended for inclusion by Vox Pop Labs' academic advisory group?

Mr. Ian McCowan: I am going to need Ms. Kim's help on this, but let me just start by describing the overall response. As for why the field test was done, there were a number of objectives. One was to ensure that in the end survey we would have a limited number of questions—obviously, you get a higher response rate when that's done, making sure that usability is high—but another was specifically for the purpose of developing the archetypes, groupings, or clusters that were fed back as part of the response to the survey.

As for your question about what was different in the field test versus the final one, I think there were six factors at play that led to changes between the two. First, as I said, there was an effort made to use the pretest to determine what the best clusters were. There was some analytic work going on in that regard. Second, there was an effort to see how the survey length could be brought to an appropriate size in order to maximize the user experience and response rates.

The third thing was trying to avoid unnecessary duplication. There were a number of questions that were in a similar kind of space. Fourth, a few questions were removed, as they were perceived as being too sensitive in our effort to ensure that the questionnaire was well received by Canadians writ large.

Fifth, some questions were used to assess user satisfaction, whether there were issues encountered, and how users responded to them. Finally, as was noted in the media, there were a few questions that were accidentally included in the pretest, and that obviously was not replicated in the final survey.

I don't know if Ms. Kim wants to add to that, but that's a quick summary.

Mr. Scott Reid: Let me just hop in then. Thank you.

That was a double-barrelled question I asked. The answer is yes, there were some questions that were in the field test that were not in the final survey. You didn't answer regarding any questions or recommendations for inclusion by the Vox Pop Labs advisory group, and because I'll be out of time before I can ask the next question, I'll just ask it now.

Are you willing to share what those questions were? Moreover, are you willing to share the results of the answers to those questions, the ones that were asked in the field test that were not included in the final survey?

Mr. Ian McCowan: You asked three questions, and if I don't get to them all, Mr. Reid, you can follow up in the next round and make sure I get them covered.

In terms of the results, I'd give the same answer that I gave last time, that it is subject to our having a look at what exactly can be provided, given the pledges made on the government's only getting aggregate data and making sure that privacy rights are respected.

As for your question about the development or the design, the questions were developed over a number of weeks. It involved Vox Pop, who have some expertise in this area, and an outside academic panel. There were obviously departmental officials. They're exempt staff involved in those discussions, so it was an iterative process, and it was not something that was done in one moment. That was basically the nature of the development process.

I'm not sure if Ms. Kim has anything she wants to add.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thanks. We're out of time. To all the participants, thanks. It's much appreciated.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

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

Minister, thank you very much for coming. I've congratulated you privately. Let me publicly congratulate you on your ascension to cabinet.

While I have a moment, I will also give my public congratulations in addition to my private ones to my colleague Filomena Tassi, who has also been appointed deputy whip of the government. I wish both of you well. I know you'll do a great job.

Minister, thank you so much for being here. As you can appreciate, this is like the last meeting with your predecessor. These really aren't meet-and-greets, hi-how-are-you courtesy meetings. We specifically called you in to deal with a couple of issues that are affecting our work. I can't go too far. We're limited because it's in camera work, but I don't think it's any big secret that the work at committee has seized up until we get these issues resolved. I can't get into the specifics, but we need some answers here that will allow us to get back to work, so I'm going to be dealing with some rather mundane issues to most people, but they are critically important for us.

You stated that you have deep respect for committees. I've heard this from the government. The Prime Minister enunciated it during the campaign all the way through and said committees were going to matter and were going to be respected. That's the issue. One of the big issues was that we were in the midst, as you rightly alluded to, of going through the Chief Electoral Officer's report. We were doing good work. We had our sleeves rolled up. We were identifying things that we could quickly agree on and setting aside the harder things that we needed to spend time on. Then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Bill C-33 landed with a thud in the middle of our work.

It left us with a real problem, because if you say you respect the work of the committees, then it would have made sense for you to wait until we had issued at least some reports to give some advice on legislation you might be considering. But the way it was done, there was total disregard for the work we're doing. It left us—me anyway, I'll speak for myself—feeling that it is a make-work project. Why bother doing all this if the government is going to ignore it and just do what it wants?

There is that issue. Then the second, somewhat attached issue is this. I appreciate Mr. Graham's raising it, and you did allude to it in part, but I really need something clear on this, Minister, with respect.

The second part of this is going forward. I had said we wanted an absolute guarantee that you aren't going to do that again. Mr. Chan and Mr. Graham argued that we could appreciate that the government can't give that kind of a blanket assurance in case we get bogged down. I understood all that. Again, I think you made some reference to that in your remarks.

What we were looking for was respect for our process, to find some way we could communicate so we would know what you are considering and you would ask us if we would turn our attention to that particular area to give you our thinking and to help advise you. You can choose to take it or not, but to just continue to produce electoral reform bills—and, by the way, as you know, getting rid of some of that awful unfair elections act stuff is a priority.... But procedures matter and committees matter, so we need some assurance that the work we are doing is actually meaningful and that the government is considering it; otherwise, why would we bother doing it? We would just go on to other things.

I'm looking for two things, if you will. One is an acknowledgement that the government was wrong. An apology would be nice and not that difficult, because it really was so wrong and disrespectful. Second, I'd like a further undertaking that there will be more dialogue so that we can actually do work that does help inform your decisions in a timely way.

Thank you, Chair.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you so much, David. I look forward to working with you and I'm glad we have such strong bay area support.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's harbour, Minister, Hamilton Harbour, not Burlington Bay.

• (1235)

Hon. Karina Gould: We could discuss that outside of this committee. I'm here four weeks to the day of being appointed because I believe in the importance of the committee and in the work you're doing. I really respect the work that you're doing.

In terms of communication, Andy Fillmore, my parliamentary secretary, is here. His job is to be engaged with Parliament. I don't have a specific work plan at this time in terms of when future legislation will come forward. I want to be in touch with the committee on that to make sure that we understand what the schedule is, what you're working on, and how we can work in concert. Ultimately, I know you and I are here for the same reason, because we want to make sure that we're doing what's right for Canadians. I know that you have a lot of experience and knowledge on this committee, and a lot of good years behind you—

Mr. David Christopherson: It sounds like a lifetime achievement award. Way to go.

Hon. Karina Gould: —and ahead of you, of course.

We want to make sure that we're getting those elements of the Fair Elections Act repealed and, of course, that we're working.... I said in my comments to David but I'm going to repeat it right now, that the work you're doing on the Chief Electoral Officer's report, on his recommendations, is valuable. I think those are two pieces that can work in tandem and in concert. I will take those recommendations very seriously to see if there are further things that can be done to ensure that we update the Elections Canada Act as best as possible and that we're doing what we need to do for Elections Canada and supporting Canadians' access to democracy.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Minister.

How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair: Three minutes.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks.

Quickly, could we have a recognition that Bill C-33 was wrong, please, to allow us to get down to our work? You can't say you respect the committee and the government, and then insult the work of this committee and not have some kind of an apology or a recognition that it was wrong to do that. Please.

Hon. Karina Gould: I'm a new minister. I want us to get started on the right foot. I want us to start working together on this, so I'm going to say let's start with me, from a place of respect, and I'm going to do that with you. I'm looking forward to working on this. We have legislation that's before the House. I'm looking forward to coming to committee, but I want to allow you some time to make sure you get the work done that you need on the recommendations, so that we can work together to do what we need to do for Canadians.

So, David, I look forward to working with you on this, because I know we can get this done.

Mr. David Christopherson: You're not making it easy, Minister.

Whatever little time I have left, I'd like to give to my friend, Mr. Cullen. It's probably about 30 seconds.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): You mentioned starting on the right foot. Your first job as minister was to kill the central promise that your government made on electoral reform. It's like you were hired to run a company that then declared bankruptcy. It seems to me that if you want to beat down cynicism, keeping a promise would be really important.

The Chair: Five seconds.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Minister, you said earlier that your government was elected on a false majority. Do you still believe that?

Hon. Karina Gould: I had said that some people, when talking about electoral reform, had put that forward in terms of why we needed to reform the system. I think it's incumbent upon all of us as parliamentarians, as leaders in our community, to make sure that we are constantly encouraging people to get involved in the democratic process. Whether something—a policy—is put forward that we agree or disagree with, it's extraordinarily important for all of us as leaders and politicians to make sure that we continue to engage Canadians on issues they're passionate about.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: So you don't believe it anymore?

The Chair: Mr. Graham, for five minutes.

Sorry?

Oh, it's Filomena's turn. Okay. Ms. Tassi first, please.

Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): I'd like to begin by thanking my colleague, Mr. Christopher-son, for his congratulations. I appreciate that and it's very well received. Like everyone else on the committee, Minister, I'd like to congratulate you and thank you for your dedication and hard work.

I'd like to read from your mandate letter, which says that you are mandated to do the following:

Bring forward options to create an independent commissioner to organize political party leaders' debates during future federal election campaigns, with a mandate to improve Canadians' knowledge of the parties, their leaders, and their policy positions.

I would like you to comment on why you believe it's important to establish an independent commissioner in order to organize leaders' debates.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you very much, Filomena, and welcome to the committee.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Thanks.

Hon. Karina Gould: It's our first day together. I look forward to working with you on this as well.

When it comes to leaders' debates, I think we saw quite clearly in the last election how, depending on the preferences of particular leaders, debates happened or did not happen. The one that comes to mind in particular is the women's debate, which I think was very important and should have gone through, regardless of a political leader deciding not to participate. It is also about setting the number of debates that are required for Canadians to engage with and listen to, and hearing the ideas and policies that different political parties have through the leaders of each of those parties.

I think this is important, and this is an important step in terms of regulating and mandating how many debates we have. Then, of course, it's up to the different political party leaders as to whether they choose to participate in them or not. However, they should happen regardless. I think that's important, so that Canadians have some kind of predictability when it comes to debates. They have predictability in terms of understanding and knowing when and how they can hear from leaders of different political parties and gain access to that information.

● (1240)

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Okay, thank you.

Your mandate letter, as well, provides that you are to “enhance transparency for the public at large and media in the political fundraising system for Cabinet members, party leaders and leadership candidates.”

Can you comment on why the government has decided to enhance the fundraising system, and why you believe it's important?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you for the question.

This is with regard to political fundraising, specifically fundraisers attended by cabinet ministers, party leaders, or those aspiring to be leaders. The fact of the matter is that while we have some very strict rules in Canada with regard to fundraising, we think it can be more accessible. The information can be more timely with regard to public access to this information.

This is something that I look forward to working with the committee on. At some point, legislation will have to be developed. Of course, this will probably come before this committee, so I look forward to your input on this, and your ideas in terms of how we can strengthen our political fundraising laws, particularly this one. I'll be looking forward to working with you on this.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Okay, thank you.

How much time do I have?

The Chair: Two minutes.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Okay, I'll share my time with MP Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.): Thank you.

Minister, like you, I'm new here today at this committee, but I'm certainly not new to the House. As Mr. Christopherson pointed out and Mr. Graham alluded to, I was here during the unfair/fair elections act, whatever the name it goes by these days.

Section 3 of the charter says, "Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election...". It's quite clear. Witness testimony at that time a few years ago, time after time, witness after witness, not just here in Canada, but also in Europe, pointed to what the former bill was trying to do, which was to limit that right to vote.

An analysis of section 3 of the charter says "There is an onus on the government to prevent unreasonable administrative [barriers] to the exercise of [our] democratic rights". It's our responsibility to make sure that these barriers do not exist. The thrust of that last piece of legislation was to put up barriers to those they felt they wanted to disenfranchise.

In my limited time, could I get your comment on this, and how, as minister, I hope you would not be in favour of putting up any more administrative barriers, and to enfranchise the most vulnerable in society to exercise their democratic right in section 3?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds for the answer.

Mr. Scott Simms: Sorry.

Hon. Karina Gould: Okay, in 20 seconds, I think that Bill C-33, should it pass second reading and come to committee and be implemented in law, would address many of those issues that you raise. I think it would be an important step forward to making sure that all Canadians have access to voting, which, as you say, is their right.

Thank you.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Richards.

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

Minister, thanks for being here.

I'm going to start with a yes or no question. I promise that in my remaining questions, I'll give you more opportunity to expand upon your answer, but I'd like to start with a yes or no.

Is your government committed to ensuring that there's no foreign influence in our elections?

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you. I appreciate your indulgence on the yes or no, just timing-wise.

After your mandate letter talks about getting rid of the electoral reform promise, in the first bullet of the things you are instructed to do, the Prime Minister indicates that you're supposed to "lead the Government of Canada's efforts to defend the Canadian electoral process from cyber threats". I was thinking about that because we don't have electronic voting or online voting, but utilize paper ballots, the good old-fashioned method of voting. Unless your government has some intention of ignoring another of the recommendations the committee makes and goes to an electronic ballot or some kind of online voting, I don't see much of a threat of some kind of hack of our election results, or something like that.

I think there is something else. Party financing is mentioned in your mandate letter, and I believe it was in your predecessor's too. It talks about looking at political party financing and third party financing, and the limits on that. One of the things I think there is a serious concern about is foreign money influencing elections through third party spending. I want to get your sense on that and whether it is something your government, in the changes you've been mandated to make, will be looking at and dealing with, that is, foreign financing via third party spending in elections and the influence that would then have on elections.

Is that something that you're committed to doing? When would we expect to see something in that regard?

• (1245)

Hon. Karina Gould: That's an interesting question. Thank you for raising it.

I want to go back to the beginning of your question, though, about political parties being hacked. Recent events have demonstrated that this is a very real issue, and it's something that we need to be attuned to and proactive on. In fact, just two weeks ago, the Australian Signals Directorate said they were actually—

Mr. Blake Richards: Sorry, Minister, I hate to interrupt you, but I have a very limited amount of time and have only about two minutes remaining. I understand that you probably have something you want to say, but could you get to the subject of the question I've asked because I want to make sure we get there. The question is about foreign financing.

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, sure. As it stands right now, foreign entities cannot give money to political parties or candidates, but—

Mr. Blake Richards: They can to third parties.

Hon. Karina Gould: Part of my mandate will be to look at spending limits for third parties. That's an interesting point you raised, and I'd be interested to hear more of your thoughts on that as we move forward.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Given that you've indicated that your government is committed to ensuring that there is no foreign influence in our elections, and you've indicated that it's something you're committed to as a government, I think it's important that you deal with this issue. It's something that I would encourage you to look at.

When the Chief Electoral Officer was before the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, there were a number of questions asked in this regard. The Chief Electoral Officer confirmed that there is significant concern that third parties can be foreign-funded in terms of surveys, websites, calling services doing push-polls and things like that, including communications with electors, all of which can be funded by them. If you are committed as a government to ensuring that foreign influence isn't part of our elections, you will have to deal with this. I would encourage you to do that quickly.

Hon. Karina Gould: Okay.

Do I have time to respond?

Mr. Blake Richards: You do, yes.

Hon. Karina Gould: I appreciate that. I think that's a really interesting point to raise. I don't know what your deliberations have been because they've been in camera, but if this is something that the committee wants to comment on, I would welcome that feedback.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Schmale, for five minutes, and then we'll go to Mr. Chan.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate that. Thank you to the Minister. I had the pleasure of meeting your father at an agricultural event in Nestleton almost a year ago now. He told me you were elected at the same time I was, so I was glad to meet him. Your father seems like a great guy.

I was listening to your conversation about looking into how people are sent information via Facebook and Twitter that is aligned with their political views. I was taken aback by your answer looking at the way you can almost control information and the government controlling information that people get. Personally, when I heard that, my back went up. That wasn't the line of questioning I was going to go on, but I'm interested to hear your thoughts about what you plan to do when you say that the government is going to ensure that people get a wider range of information.

• (1250)

Hon. Karina Gould: I think you misheard me, because it was more about ensuring the integrity of information. It's actually not the government controlling information at all. It was more a general comment about the way our media landscape is at the moment. I think it's incumbent upon us as community leaders, as politicians, and as a government to think about how we ensure that integrity of the media moving forward, but, obviously, the government can't control and will not be controlling that kind of information.

The comment was more with regard to how information is currently consumed by Canadians, by people around the world, and

the kinds of tools we can offer our citizens to provide them with the ability to discern the quality of the information they are receiving.

I think this is something that is very much at a preliminary stage of deliberation and something we're very much just coming to grips with. I certainly didn't mean it in the way you suggested.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay. I just want to make sure the government isn't controlling or showing people what information they think people should be reading.

Hon. Karina Gould: No. Absolutely not.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay.

I want to move on to what you said before about cyber-attacks. As my colleague Mr. Richards said, you can't really hack paper ballots. If you're able to speak to it, what threats do you potentially know about, or what are you looking at to help protect our systems, so to speak?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thanks for the question.

I want to be clear that at this point we don't know of any potential or existing threats that have come to Canadian political parties or the Canadian political system, but we did see in a recent election of one of our close allies attempts to influence the election and to collect information from political parties. As I was starting to tell your colleague Mr. Richards, the Australian Signals Directorate has recently offered the same kind of information and best practices to its political parties because it has experienced some attempts to access the information political parties have. France has also made similar offers and will be offering a session to its political parties at the end of the month. We know some of our other allies have also experienced this.

Really, this is a proactive step for—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Yes. I believe in security. I'm with you on that. I think the issue in the States was the release of emails. I'm not sure if the people in the DNC were mad because they got caught or because they wrote them. I think it might have been because they got caught.

Hon. Karina Gould: It wouldn't be about the government protecting those systems. It would be about their providing this information to all political parties on how they can best protect the integrity of their systems, because it's not just about emails. Political parties do have information with regard to Canadians. I think our government believes it's important to protect that. Of course, it would be at the discretion of political parties to take us up on this offer.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I have one more quick comment. You were talking about the fundraising. I think you're correct that currently what's going on with the Prime Minister doesn't break the law, but it does break the ethical laws.

I would think to make it easier—

Hon. Karina Gould: I didn't say that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: No, I did.

Hon. Karina Gould: But you said I was correct, and I didn't say that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: To make it easier, instead of changing the law or strengthening the law, it would be easier just to ask him to stop doing what he's doing.

I have only a minute left, and if it's okay with the chair, I would like to give my time to my colleague Elizabeth May.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): I'm very grateful.

Thank you, Jamie.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I really have only one question. I think there's a conflict in your mandate letter. As one of my colleagues said earlier, this may be above your pay grade to answer. I don't think it's about pay grade. I know your mandate letter comes from the Prime Minister.

It's very fundamental to your role as Minister of Democratic Institutions, as you said in your opening, to restore Canadians' trust and to encourage participation. Yet your mandate letter puts you in a position of immediately breaking trust with Canadians by withdrawing the commitment to electoral reform.

My question is not to ask you to sort out that conflict but to ask whether you are willing to pursue with members of Parliament who want to find potentially a middle ground so you can, through electoral reform, restore the trust of Canadians in the promise the Liberals made.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you, Elizabeth, for your question, and thanks for joining us here today. I look forward to working with you on many different issues as we have in the past and as we move forward.

I think there are many aspects of my mandate that will continue to enhance trust and respect in democracy, which I look forward to working on. I think it's also important that we spent a long time consulting with Canadians. A lot of people in this room spent a lot of time consulting with Canadians and we heard many different points of view, and all of them were valid, because everyone has their own point of view and their own perspective on that. So I think it's important that we listen to Canadians and I think it's important that we take this step forward and that we continue to work with the committee and with members of Parliament to do what we can to enhance trust and democracy.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chan, I understand that you don't need to go in camera.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I don't think I need to go in camera. I've listened to the lines of questions from all my colleagues and I think I'm on the same subject matter. If we're all confident that it has already been on the public record, I'm fine to continue in the open.

Thank you, Minister. I've listened carefully and my questions all relate to the first line in your mandate letter regarding cybersecurity threats. I specifically want to follow up on some of the comments you already made to both my colleague David and my colleague Blake's line of questioning on cybersecurity threats.

How does the Communications Security Establishment liaise with political parties as you work with it along with the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Public Safety? Should we be basically reaching out and providing designated individuals who will be working with you, with these other ministers, and with the CSE? Then I think what is most important from the perspective of political parties—and I recognize you already answered this question by saying that the intent of your mandate letter is to provide best practices—concerns any information that might be shared by the political parties with the CSE and with you and the other ministers. How do we have confidence that this information will be compartmentalized and not shared with other political parties?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you for that question, because it raises a really important point. I think I said this already but I'll reiterate that this is not about the government or the CSE going and seeking information from political parties; it's about their providing information to political parties. At no point, at least in this mandate and in this particular item, does the government receive information from political parties. I think that's a really important distinction to be made, because if this is to be successful and we are to provide support and assistance to political parties, then parties and Canadians need to know that this is about providing assistance on how they can protect their information, as opposed to collecting and going in and taking any information.

Did you want to add to that?

Mr. Arnold Chan: As a follow-up on that, Minister, will there be any sort of risk assessment engaged in by the CSE—

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes.

Mr. Arnold Chan: —in terms of potential threats as you provide that advice to political parties? Would it extend to all political parties, not just the parties in the House of Commons but potentially others that are not currently represented? How far would that mandate go?

Hon. Karina Gould: That's something that needs to be explored. I think as it's worded right now, it's all political parties represented in the House, but that's a conversation to be had with the Communications Security Establishment. They have not yet done this analysis because it has not been part of the mandate. That's a conversation I'll be having with them to explore how to develop this, but it will be important that they do a landscape analysis of what are existing threats, emerging threats, and potential threats. There will be a public analysis of this, but there will also be more information given specifically to political parties so they can take that information and use it how they best see fit.

Mr. Arnold Chan: In terms of any information gathered through this particular process, what would the reporting mechanism be back to Parliament? Would it be back to this committee, would it be through the public safety committee, or would it potentially even be to the new national security and intelligence committee of parliamentarians proposed in Bill C-22?

Hon. Karina Gould: I think that's still to be determined. However, I do believe that it would be very important for this to be reported back to Parliament. If Bill C-22 passes, that committee would certainly be monitoring and have access to this information. That committee would have purview over anything that deals with security intelligence or the CSE, so it would be. However, again I think it is important to highlight and to stress that the information collected would not be information from political parties. It's about providing political parties information to protect themselves. We need to make that distinction really clear—

Mr. Arnold Chan: Of course.

Hon. Karina Gould:—so that people have confidence in this.

• (1300)

Mr. Arnold Chan: I just want to follow-up in what little remaining time I have, about two minutes perhaps—

The Chair: One minute and a half.

Mr. Arnold Chan: —with respect to questions that my friends in the official opposition raised regarding.... We basically use a paper ballot process, but in part of the recommendations in the public report from the Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada is exploring the use of technology as a basis to improve the voting process. It actually provided a demonstration to the committee on some of that proposed new use of technology.

Is there anything we need to look at as a committee, as you move forward on your mandate letter, that you think might be a potential risk to the integrity of the voting process, as Elections Canada begins to explore greater use of technology as a basis of enhancing the voting process?

Hon. Karina Gould: That's a really important question, and something for us to consider.

If I'm not wrong, I believe the Netherlands this past weekend confirmed that it was going back to paper ballots because of potential risk.

We do need to keep in mind and in our consideration that there are technologies that can help and assist people with disabilities to make voting more accessible for them. How can the procedure and House affairs committee look at some of those technologies and ensure their integrity to make sure that there's no possibility for tampering, so we know that those votes are integral, valid, and respect the democratic process?

I would definitely encourage the committee to take all of that into consideration as we move forward.

Mr. Arnold Chan: One final quick question.

Again, this wasn't clear when I reviewed your mandate letter, Minister, but as you go through the review of cybersecurity threats, is it within your mandate to make recommendations back to the President of the Treasury Board for additional resources, should there be an assessment of potential risk to the integrity of data, for example, within Elections Canada, or within political parties?

Do you have the ability, basically, to give us the capacity to deal with it?

Hon. Karina Gould: If you would like to interpret the mandate letter as my being responsible for democratic institutions and the integrity of the system, those are things that we need to be mindful of and keep in consideration as we move forward.

I would certainly welcome the committee's perspective on those, and how we move forward. It's so important that Canadians have confidence in the system, so that when an election happens, they know they can trust the results and continue to move forward with it.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and officials for coming.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll suspend for 15 minutes and go in camera for committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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