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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, October 5, 2006

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, October 5, 2006

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*English*]

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8) I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's response to three petitions.

* * *

PROCEEDS OF CRIME (MONEY LAUNDERING) AND TERRORIST FINANCING ACT

Hon. Rob Nicholson (for the Minister of Finance) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-25, An Act to amend the Proceeds of Crime (Money Laundering) and Terrorist Financing Act and the Income Tax Act and to make a consequential amendment to another Act.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the seventh report related to the Canadian Museums, and the eighth report related to the court challenges program at the fiscal 2005-06 level of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage.

HUMAN RESOURCES, SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE STATUS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fourth report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

PETITIONS

FALUN GONG

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my privilege today to table some petitions which originate in the constituencies of Lethbridge and Calgary Southeast.

The petitioners urge the government to investigate the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners.

MARRIAGE

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is to re-open the issue of marriage in order to promote and defend marriage as the lawful union of one man and one woman.

AGE OF CONSENT

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my next petition is from concerned Canadians who wish to see the age of consent raised from 14 to 16.

EUTHANASIA

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the last petition is one to maintain current criminal sanctions against euthanasia and that greater resources be devoted to palliative care for the terminally ill.

[*Translation*]

HOMELESSNESS

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to present a petition on behalf of people who have expressed their support for the RHF and small SCPI communities programs. This petition is from the Maison d'accueil pour sans-abri de Chicoutimi. This is a shelter for homeless men and, with great support, it is calling for the SCPI program to be renewed.

I therefore present this petition.

* * *

[*English*]

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

*Business of Supply***PRIVILEGE**

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with some regret but with a sense of responsibility that I rise on a matter of privilege.

I refer to Marleau and Montpetit under “The Structure of Privilege” on page 70 where it states:

—both the House in its collective capacity and Members individually have the responsibility to protect from abuse their rights and immunities, particularly freedom of speech.

Under “FREEDOM OF SPEECH” on page 71, it states:

...a fundamental right without which they would be hampered in the performance of their duties.

That is what freedom of speech refers to.

It permits them to speak in the House without inhibition, to refer to any matter or express any opinion as they see fit, to say what they feel needs to be said in the furtherance of the national interest and the aspirations of their constituents.

Yesterday, just prior to the taking of the recorded divisions, I rose on a point of order on a matter of relevance and this was with regard to the member for Nepean—Carleton who was in the process of addressing the House.

In Marleau and Montpetit, on page 83, under the section, “FREEDOM FROM OBSTRUCTION, INTERFERENCE, INTIMIDATION AND MOLESTATION”, it states:

Members are entitled to go about their parliamentary business undisturbed. The assaulting, menacing, or insulting of any Member on the floor of the House or while he is coming or going to or from the House, or an account of his behaviour during a proceeding in Parliament, is a violation of the rights of Parliament. Any form of intimidation...of a person for or on account of his behaviour during a proceeding in Parliament could amount to contempt.

I refer further to dealing with a matter of privilege. On page 121 of Marleau and Montpetit it states:

The House of Commons is certainly the most important secular body in Canada. It is said that each House of Parliament is a “court” with respect to its own privileges and dignity and the privileges of its Members. The purpose of raising matters of “privilege” in either House of Parliament is to maintain the respect and credibility due to and required of each House in respect of these privileges, to uphold its powers, and to enforce the enjoyment of the privileges of its Members.

That includes the freedom of speech.

A genuine question of privilege is therefore a serious matter not to be reckoned with lightly and accordingly ought to be rare, and thus rarely raised in the House of Commons.

Finally, Marleau and Montpetit, in guiding members with regard to matters occurring in the House, said that a complaint on a matter of privilege must satisfy two conditions before it can be accorded precedence over orders of the day. First, the Speaker must be convinced that a prima facie case of breach of privilege has been made, and second, that the matter must be raised at the earliest opportunity.

Dealing with the second matter first, as I indicated, this matter happened yesterday during debates at approximately 5:25 p.m., just prior to the sounding of the bells for recorded divisions, at which time I rose on a point of order due to relevance.

Mr. Speaker, at that point I was approached by the member for Nepean—Carleton who had crossed the floor and came to my desk.

He told me that if I were to continue to raise these frivolous points of order that there would be retribution. This is a matter of threatening or intimidating a member of Parliament in the conduct of their responsibilities. The member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskas-ing, who was in his seat, observed and heard all that was said.

I have been in this place since 1993 and I have a great deal of respect for the House. I take this matter very seriously because there is a pattern, there is a history, with regard to the member for Nepean—Carleton. However, I will not go into those as the Speaker is well aware of them.

● (1010)

I have raised this question of privilege because I do not think any member should be approached by another member, particularly in the House, and told that they should not be doing something that is their right and that, if they do, they would be subject to some sort of retribution.

I believe I have satisfied the two conditions with regard to a matter of privilege: first, in regard to making a case that it is a prima facie breach of my privileges as a member not to be threatened or intimidated by another member in the performance of the conduct of my duties; and second, having raised it with the Speaker at the earliest opportunity.

Should the Speaker find a prima facie case of privilege, I would be prepared to move the appropriate motion.

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will certainly raise this matter with the hon. member for Nepean—Carleton, but you have been around long enough to know that there are usually two sides to every story.

I know the hon. member in question is a responsible individual and, quite frankly, if the hon. member was going to raise this, it might have been a courtesy to let the individual know that this was being raised at this particular time. However, I will certainly inform him of the fact that this has now taken place in the House.

Again, there are two sides to every story. The hon. member for Nepean—Carleton is a very responsible member of this caucus and of this government and I am quite sure he will have something to say on this matter.

● (1015)

The Speaker: The Chair will take the matter under advisement and get back to the House in respect of this alleged breach of privilege in due course and we will deal with the matter then.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—FOR OLDER WORKERS INCOME SUPPORT

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I believe that you would find unanimous consent in the House for the following motion. All parties agree:

Business of Supply

That, at the conclusion of today's debate on the opposition motion in the name of the member for Chambly—Borduas, all questions necessary to dispose of the motion be deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred until Monday, October 16, 2006, at the expiry of the time provided for government orders.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord have the unanimous consent of the House to move this motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: The House has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ) moved:

That the House reiterate to the government the importance of implementing a real income support program for older workers that would apply to all older workers in all economic sectors, in all regions.

He said: Mr. Speaker, the matter at hand today is a most important one. It will attract the attention of all workers. Management is also affected to a considerable extent by the layoffs currently experienced across the country. In addition, our attention is drawn to the situation in Quebec in particular.

In every area of activity and every region, older workers who have the misfortune of losing their job past the age of 50 or past the more vulnerable age of 55 are facing a major problem.

This morning, I have the honour of moving the Bloc Québécois motion asking that the House vote on the following motion:

That the House reiterate to the government the importance of implementing a real income support program for older workers that would apply to all older workers in all economic sectors, in all regions.

We were careful to specify that this would apply to all older workers in all economic sectors, in all regions, because over the past few days, the government has indicated its intention to target specific regions and sectors for limited periods of time. This would be very inconvenient, because once again, the work would be done in a selective, arbitrary, and, above all, discriminatory manner.

When people lose their jobs, it makes no difference whether they are in regions with lower unemployment rates. The fact that your neighbour is working will not pay your bills.

This program has already been in operation and has proven its value. It was implemented in 1988 and ran until 1997. The Liberal government of the day cut it in 1997 in a blind move with no regard for the negative impact on the workers affected.

The Bloc Québécois finds it inexcusable that the federal government, the current government, is also taking its sweet time implementing this program.

The Speech from the Throne emphasized the importance of re-introducing the program for older worker adjustment (POWA). The \$100 million allocated in the budget and announced by the Prime Minister himself sent a clear signal that the current government intended to re-introduce the program. A unanimous motion in the Quebec National Assembly invited the Government of Canada to re-introduce this program and indicated that Quebec was prepared to

participate to the same degree as in previous years, that is, to contribute 30%. The federal government would therefore contribute 70%. This program is actually not that expensive.

We are disconcerted by the Conservative government's callous attitude toward complaints voiced by workers, workers' representatives, and the Bloc Québécois in its attempts to correct this grave injustice.

I emphasize also that this program must deal with older workers who cannot be retrained or who have not been retrained. If a person works in the same trade all his or her life and is a specialist and that occupation disappears when the person is 55 or older, that involves learning difficulties. But above all—given the length of time that person can expect to remain in the labour market—this situation discourages employers from investing in helping someone to qualify for a new job. That represents an additional problem for older workers.

• (1020)

In historical terms, as I was saying earlier, this program, which was in existence from 1988 to 1997 was shared-cost. In 1996, the year before the program was abolished, 11,700 people participating in this program had been involved in 900 group layoffs.

At the time, the program cost the federal government a paltry \$17 million. Out of the then \$17 billion budget, \$17 million represented only a small slice; in fact, 1% of the total.

Even today, it is impossible to understand that they acted in that way in the past and that previous governments and the current government have not corrected this injustice, as I mentioned earlier.

Concerning the difficulty of finding new employment, in 2004, the Employment Insurance Commission released statistics for 2004-2005 indicating a low rate of unemployment due to the economic recovery. Granted there was a low unemployment rate, but let us look at the percentages. Older workers are over-represented among the long-term unemployed. Older workers accounted for 21.3% of the long-term unemployed group, while they made up only 12.5 per cent of the active workforce. In terms of unemployed workers, that group had double its rate of representation in the active workforce. That is because they have a hard time finding new employment, as I indicated previously.

Let us talk about pilot projects. The attitude of the current government is directly opposite to our approach. There are two factors to consider. First, pilot projects enable workers to be trained in order to find new work opportunities. However, the opportunities offered to these workers seldom relate to the work skills they have developed over the years. That makes it even more difficult for them to gain access to that training.

Furthermore, fewer than 4% of all those trained in these pilot projects manage to find stable employment again. Of course they can find small jobs and also end up in situations much more difficult in terms of working conditions than they had before. As far as comparable employment goes, though, or at least permanent employment, fewer than 4% are successful. Which means that this is not the solution.

Business of Supply

The second thing the Conservative government tells us is that studies are being done. There is something a bit confusing in this House. When the government changes, it is as though nothing had ever been done before.

Before, during the Liberal régime, we heard the same argument: studies are being done. At the Standing Committee on Human Resources and Social Development, we have received a good share of these studies, as well as all the studies concerning POWA.

How is it that the current government has not been able to access these studies? Our sources are good sources; they are government sources. We have used these sources to develop our position—as have other of society's stakeholders, particularly the central labour bodies.

● (1025)

The major labour federations in Quebec have developed a common position in this regard. So the government experts and our studies, as well as those conducted by the federations, show first of all that the past experience has been an entirely positive one and that the program was fully justified. In fact it may have been one of the most successful programs.

As far as the situation in industry is concerned—whether the textile, clothing, footwear or now the lumber industry, to name but a few—the experience of recent years shows that this program is still necessary.

Also, as far as job losses are concerned, the worst-case scenario would be for this program to cost \$50 million the first year and then \$75 million in subsequent years. Naturally the cost of living evolves. It has to be provided for. Still I remind you that this is the worst-case scenario.

So we do not understand why the government is still doing studies, when all the data are on the table for a decision to be made. Regarding the difficulty of finding work for older people, I would point out that 39.1%—so about 40%—of older workers in the labour force have not completed their high school education, compared to 18% among workers aged 25 to 54. This is a further difficulty.

Let us look again briefly at the costs, but this time in terms of benefits. The program was revised in 1993. The latest data show that under POWA at the time, people were receiving between \$760 and \$1,000 in benefits, depending on their income.

I have briefly described the history of the program and the recent history of job losses. I said earlier that the throne speech stated that POWA should be reinstated. This was also mentioned in the budget.

Nevertheless, on June 9, 2005, I had the honour of presenting in this House a Bloc Québécois motion that received unanimous support. Yet the Liberal Party, which was in power then, never acted on the motion or put it into effect. And the Conservative government—which is still the government in this House—has not acted on the motion either, despite making two additional commitments since Parliament resumed.

In my opinion, this is unacceptable and scandalous, even from the standpoint of democracy. Here in the House, we often talk about

setting examples of democracy for other peoples. Perhaps we could start by setting an example in practice.

Moreover, last year, the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities—then known as the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities—made 28 recommendations to this House after conducting a long and well-done process with consultations, etc. None of these recommendations has been acted on. And they included POWA, the program for older worker adjustment.

I have spoken up to now about POWA, because that is what it was called. But we have to adapt it to today's reality. Some things have changed, and that is why we should now call it the “income support program for older workers”, because there are already training programs for labour market integration.

● (1030)

It is important to draw this distinction so that the government stops shirking its responsibility for income support for these people by falling back on training.

Insofar as the insecurity of current labour markets is concerned, it seems that only one party in the House can see what is really happening. Apparently, it is only when a government, a political party, is beaten that it starts to see what is really happening, as if being beaten is clarifying.

For at least four years now, the Bloc has been constantly pointing out the difficulties facing industry, the manufacturing industry in particular but other industries as well. The Bloc has been constantly asking the government to take appropriate action to ensure that employment is maintained at a maximum in the face of the push and pull on international markets.

Some countries have instituted controls. This government has done nothing. In the final analysis, it did nothing to protect workers when they lost their jobs, just as it did nothing to protect their jobs in the first place. It is disgraceful.

Look at the people at Whirlpool in Rivière-du-Loup, the textile workers in Huntingdon, the lumber workers in Lanauidière, the workers in the sawmills and in pulp and paper in Mont-Laurier, in northwestern Quebec in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean or Ville de La Baie,. Hundreds of people have lost their jobs. Some 20% to 22% of them were over 55 years old.

I am emphasizing Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean more because a leading member of Parliament who is also a minister sits here in the House of Commons. When he was getting himself elected, he said, like his colleagues in Quebec, that the Bloc could not do anything but the Conservatives would deal with all that when they came to power. Ever since taking power, though, they have been running away from their responsibilities. They cannot even go and meet with these workers. We are the only people who are willing to meet with them now.

In the footwear sector in Quebec City, Chaussures Régence and Chaussures St-Émile are in the riding of Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles. One of our eminent colleagues—a man who was highly thought of by the House and got some major legislation through—was defeated. That is what happens in a democracy. But why was he defeated? Because the Conservative candidate said that once the Conservatives were in power, they would take care of all that. So what have they taken care of so far? Nothing. Still they try to delude people. That too is odious. They tell people that they will take care of this or that specifically for them. But things cannot be done piecemeal. They need to pay some attention.

I just came back from touring through nearly all the regions of Quebec. In the Gaspésie and Îles-de-la-Madeleine, people find themselves in an incredible situation now because of the fishing industry. This cannot go on.

This is not a complicated measure. We just have to adopt this motion. If the Conservative government needs our backing, that is what we will give them. However, they must take it and they must vote with us. In other words, they have to walk the talk.

They must stop deluding people. It is time to take action and implement the income support program for older workers as soon as possible. This is urgent and has been urgent for some time. Indeed, for years now, people have been forced into poverty. They have been left without assistance. They must be given the help they need to pull through, which is what they deserve. In the end, they need every little bit they earn just to eat. Many have been forced to sell their house in order to survive, even though they have spent their whole lives working just to have a home.

• (1035)

In conclusion, I call upon all legislators and parliamentarians here today to do the right thing so that tomorrow, each and every one of us—everyone, Mr. Speaker—can return to our ridings and say that we did our job and that we took action to help these people, because the existing program costs \$50 million out of a budget of \$16 billion. It is such a small amount. Furthermore, we do not want the money to be taken from the employment insurance fund because those people are leaving the workforce and society owes them this recognition, at least.

[English]

Mr. Dave Batters (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the member's speech with great interest. Let there be no doubt that within that realm this government's priority is to assist those older workers seeking employment. We want them to find and retain jobs. Our government is focused on providing older workers with the tools they need to remain employable. We support retraining for older workers and efforts to ease their transition into new employment.

The member made a comment in his speech about older workers who had gone through older worker pilot projects. He said that only 4% of these individuals had found permanent jobs. I am going to check with the minister, but I find that really surprising and tough to believe. I would not be surprised if this government would reject that figure. He said that 4% had found permanent jobs, yet he is asking for the reinstatement of these programs. I am a bit perplexed. If only 4% of the people who have gone through these pilot projects have

Business of Supply

found permanent employment, why is the member calling for the reinstatement of these programs?

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Speaker, that is a very good question.

First, we have to keep in mind that these people are over 55 and are looking for new jobs.

We also have to keep in mind that the four per cent consists of people who were able to find permanent, worthwhile jobs, like they had before.

People who are eligible for income support for older workers will continue to look for work. The ones who are able to work will then stop receiving benefits. First, they have to be capable of working. There are some individuals, however, who will not be able to qualify for new jobs. They must be given ongoing support.

Of course when you are young, like the member, it is different. He still has many good years ahead of him. He will be able to find a new job, with his skills and his talent, among other things, when he is no longer here in the House of Commons—in other words, after the next election, probably. Still, when he reaches the age of 55 and if he does not have work then, he is going to find that it is pretty hard to find a job. That is a very different thing.

To conclude, I would point out that we are not talking about a fast track for getting an income between the ages of 55 and 65, we are talking about providing support for people who are unable to find new jobs, to enable them to manage until they get their Income Security pension.

• (1040)

[English]

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the hon. member for standing up for older workers, who are the productive part of Canadian society.

I am in support of quality programs that meet the needs of all of Canada's older workers. The government has to develop a pan-Canadian strategy that would incorporate skills upgrading, flexible work environments, and training with job placements. Since the minority Conservative government has come into power, it has done nothing for older workers. Instead, it has given lip service, nothing else. In fact, it has cut programs for older workers. I am troubled with that member supporting the budget when there was nothing mentioned for assisting older workers.

Mr. Dave Batters: Everyone supported the budget. You unanimously supported it.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: I can read it clearly, Mr. Speaker. The government cut \$17 million from workplace skills. It has also taken funds away from literacy programs that are needed. As the hon. member mentioned, 40% of older people have no skills in reading or writing because they did not go to school. The minority—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Business of Supply

The hon. member can sit down when I am standing. The hon. member has had a lot of time to put his question and it is time for the answer. The hon. member for Chambly—Borduas.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Speaker, I am disappointed that this kind of demagoguery would be exhibited here, this morning.

We have to make a distinction between the budget and the cuts that were announced last week. None of those cuts was included in the budget. We are categorically opposed to the cuts announced last week. My colleague's comment is entirely inappropriate and is not consistent with the truth.

I will not revisit the nature of our support for this transitional budget, which brings in changes concerning the fiscal imbalance. The government is going to have to deliver the goods. When it comes to the cuts announced last week, they were not in the throne speech.

I would have liked the member to tell us whether he will support the motion and whether he will urge his colleagues to take a different attitude from the one they took when they were in power, and whether he will join with us in calling on the government to implement an income support program for older workers as quickly as possible.

• (1045)

[*English*]

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened to my colleague across with great interest and agree with much of what he said about support for displaced workers. It is something that needs to be done, but I have a question that flows from that support for displaced workers.

I am surprised that your political party is supporting the softwood deal with the U.S. that the Conservative government has put forward, because we all know that in my community and in communities across Quebec there will be lots of displaced workers due to that softwood agreement. Yet you are supporting that agreement, so I see an inherent—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member has twice used the second person. It is “his party”, not “your party”. I wonder if the hon. member could remember that rule.

Ms. Dawn Black: I apologize, Mr. Speaker.

My question for the hon. member is, how can he support this agreement when it in turn will bring more and more displaced workers to every region of Canada, including Quebec?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Speaker, the facts are the facts.

We did not negotiate the agreement. Once the agreement is negotiated, the stakeholders—the people in the industry—must tell us what they think of it. We must also determine what impact the difference will have on what they are entitled to. They are entitled to receive all amounts withheld by the American government. The Conservative government changed this entitlement in the agreement. We recognize that.

Just because the Conservative government changed this entitlement, should we throw the baby out with the bath water—that is, should we vote against this agreement and make things worse for the industry since what was negotiated was not right? A good number of companies have had to close their doors. For example, tens of thousands of sawmill workers were laid off. Is it their desire and ours to see that the remaining workers be laid off? The industry and the unions talked to us about this. My colleague and her party are very close to the unions. In Quebec and throughout the country, the people have said that we must support the agreement. We represent these citizens. The people, the unions and the companies have told us to vote in favour of the agreement, or it will be the end of them. Municipalities and municipal authorities also told us that without it they will have to shut down villages.

It does not bother us at all to vote for an imperfect agreement because it is in the best interests of the people we represent.

[*English*]

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be splitting my time today with the hon. member for Mégantic—L'Érable.

I am very pleased to rise today to respond to the motion from the hon. member for Chambly—Borduas.

As the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, I know that Canadians can draw strength from the fact that Canada is near the top again this year in terms of job growth among G-7 and OECD countries. Our unemployment rate of 6.5% in August was one of the lowest in the last 30 years. Job gains have occurred in every region and across all age groups right across this country.

However, I do share the member's concern for the situation that older workers face when they are suddenly left without work, due to plant closures, downsizing or other economic circumstances beyond their control.

The hon. member's motion includes all economic sectors in all regions, but we know that the problem is especially acute for older workers in small communities that depend on a single industry for their livelihood. This particularly affects workers in sectors such as forestry, fishing, mining and textiles.

For older workers, the challenges that losing their job presents are especially tough. Throughout their working lives, these people have been self-reliant and independent. They have worked hard at their jobs day by day. They have been saving up for their retirement. Then, before their plans are in place, hard times hit their place of employment.

In many small towns, when the major employer lays off workers, the entire community is affected. Often, the older workers need a few more years of income before they can retire. What do they do now? Do they rely upon their retirement savings until their pension kicks in? Do they sell their house or take out a new mortgage, which is pretty tough to do when they don't have a job? Or do they try to find another line of work? But, then, how would they learn the new skills?

Business of Supply

These are hard choices for people who have worked all their lives trying to build security for their families. We all share a concern for the plight of displaced older workers in situations like this.

In responding to the motion from the hon. member for Chambly—Borduas, we must ask ourselves: What is the best solution? Is an early retirement program the answer; and if so, would that solution suit the needs of Canada's labour market, or even that of the local economy?

An income support program, such as the hon. member proposes, would essentially remove all older workers from the workforce now and in the future. This removal would be premature and detrimental to the workers, and to Canada's labour market.

Older workers have become the principal source of labour growth in recent years. Since late 2002, it accounted for over half the employment growth in Canada and increases in older worker participation have become the major driver of increases in the overall Canadian participation rate. As the Canadian population ages, encouraging older worker participation will play a very important role in meeting employment demand.

Simply put, Canada cannot at this time afford to pension off workers who are valuable and all too often an unrecognized asset. Rather, any intervention should be geared to providing those workers with the tools they need to remain employable and should not act as a disincentive to labour market participation, relocation or the pursuit of skills upgrading.

Canada's economy needs the skills, the experience and the expertise of all older workers. We need the perspective they bring from a lifetime in the workforce. This is especially true for smaller and medium-sized businesses that often have a hard time finding people, and these businesses are the engine of our Canadian economy.

Canada is not the only country that faces these challenges. In fact, the OECD has recently reviewed the situation facing older workers in the industrialized world. It points out that with the demographics of an aging society, economies need to keep older workers in the workforce to ensure growth and prosperity in a period like we are facing now, of shrinking labour supply. In fact, the OECD advises against early retirement programs and against any other type of program structure that would lead to and encourage early retirement.

● (1050)

In the budget last May, Canada's new government committed to examining ways to help displaced older workers. We promised to undertake a feasibility study to evaluate current and potential measures to assist older workers in the Canadian workforce. This study will examine a number of options and will involve consultations with provinces and territories, stakeholder groups and experts from across Canada.

The options examined may well include early retirement benefits which would be along the lines of the suggestions of the hon. member for Chambly—Borduas, but there are other options. There are other ways to help older workers while ensuring that they remain a vital force in the economy.

We have a very solid foundation to build on assisting older workers reintegrate into the workforce. The Government of Canada has the benefit of drawing from lessons learned from the older worker pilot project initiative that concluded in May of this year.

Let me share with the House some of the lessons that we learned from that. We found that the most successful pilot projects are those that combine employment assistance services with some form of training, marketing and work experience. As well, we found that it is important for the programs to be flexible. One size does not fit all. The best programs allow attention to individual situations and needs, including the skills of older workers, specific labour market conditions and the identification of opportunities that exist in specific cities, towns or regions.

Programs must provide enough time for displaced older workers to learn new skills. The training must be practical and relevant to the participants. There are indeed potential new careers for those displaced older workers, careers that take advantage of their lifetime experience and interests, careers that can help older workers take pride in the way that they continue to build the economy of their communities, and careers that provide self-reliance. It is important to identify the new careers that are most relevant and realistic for older workers on a case by case basis.

In the meantime, contrary to what the hon. member opposite would have us believe, we have many programs to help those who find themselves without work. Displaced older workers are taking advantage of our active employment benefits under part II of the employment insurance program. This helps them find and maintain new employment by increasing their skills, gaining work experience, getting job counselling and job placement services, and accessing labour market information.

Do members know that last year over 80,000 workers over 50 years of age participated in employment insurance part II programming? In addition, close to 230,000 workers received \$1.4 billion in employment insurance part I programming. We are not saying that this is the only solution for these workers. In fact, we have committed to take the time and put in the effort required to identify the best solutions for displaced older workers in today's labour market.

Until the results of the feasibility study are known, we should not limit our range of options. That is why I cannot vote in favour of the hon. member's motion as it is written no matter how much I share his concerns. We need programs that keep older workers as active participants in the Canadian economy. We need programs that can be flexible enough to meet the needs of different individuals and communities. We need to take advantage of what we have learned about what kinds of programs work and which programs do not.

I urge hon. members to join me in voting down this motion as worded.

● (1055)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. minister for presenting her position on the motion in such a clear manner.

Business of Supply

I think the minister would agree that what we heard this morning is still rhetoric about training. Providing training and reintegrating these older workers in the labour market will contribute to the Canadian economy. I agree. We agree.

For people who are able to work and to retrain this is not a problem. We do not deny that. But we are talking about people who are unable to retrain or, for one reason or another, cannot work even if they have retrained.

We have to realize that in the country of Canada, and in the future country of Quebec, there is a stark reality: there are people over 55 who cannot find new employment.

I want to know if the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development recognizes that. If so, will she vote in favour of the motion?

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, we recognize that older workers who have been displaced really face many challenges, there is no doubt about that. That is why we are committed to our feasibility study because we do not want to rush in with some quick fix solution, some haphazard program that may or may not work. We want to take advantage of all of the lessons that have been learned and even develop some new ones, so that we can build programs that will work in the long term.

It is really important to note that Canada's demand for labour is just the opposite of what it was in the 1990s. In the 1990s, there were way too many people for way too few jobs. Today's market and going forward 10 years at least, we will be facing just the opposite where there will be way too few people in our country for too many jobs.

We have to take advantage of the people who are here to fill those jobs. Quite frankly, the older workforce, 55 plus, are the single best pool of talent and we have to tap into it. We cannot afford as a country to keep older workers out of the labour market. We must encourage their participation in every way possible.

• (1100)

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minister speaks a good game, but she must be disappointed with the complete lack of support that she has been receiving from her cabinet colleagues. She must be disappointed that the tools she needs to accomplish what she professes have been eliminated, reduced and slashed.

She talks about the retraining of seasonally unemployed elderly workers, in most cases workers that are 55 to 65 years of age. Three months into the fiscal year in my riding there was no money for the retraining of those people. Some of them, we recognize, need basic skills before they can reintegrate into new professions or new jobs. Literacy programs, the most important and the basic fundamental building block to learning a trade, have been removed and slashed.

If the Conservatives want to do research in the rural part of this country, where most of the seasonally unemployed are, they cannot even go to a CAP site in the future because it has been eliminated. That is how people were able to do their own training. That is how they were able to do job searches. That is how they continued their

education. No more now. They can go to the University of Calgary or somewhere else if they leave East Pubnico, but if they are going to be in western rural parts of the country, the minister should be ashamed of her cabinet colleagues. She should fight a lot harder for people who need the assistance of the government.

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member needs to go back and review some of the facts because he is frankly quite wrong in much of what he said.

One of our early actions as a new government was to bring in the seasonal workers pilot project to help the very seasonal workers to whom he refers, five week pilot projects to enhance the benefits for the unemployed who work in seasonal jobs.

We are also spending over \$2 billion in workplace skills development, over \$80 million in literacy programs, as well as over \$300 million to help new Canadians get the skills they need in this market, all of the things which the hon. member voted against.

[Translation]

Mr. Christian Paradis (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to take part in the debate in this House on the opposition member's motion on support measures for older workers that would apply to all older workers in all economic sectors, in all regions.

It is an honour for me to share my time with the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge her excellent work.

Allow me first to point out that Canada's new government holds older workers and their contribution to society in the highest regard. We are well aware that we owe them a great deal not just for their past contribution, but also for their current and future contribution to the labour market and to our well-being. Generations before us have shaped the Canada we know and love today and we are extremely grateful to them for that.

The contribution of all Canadians is essential to our collective well-being. As hon. members know, Canada, like all the industrialized countries, is facing an aging population. In fact, by 2020, the number of people between 55 and 64 will increase by 50%.

On the one hand, life expectancy is on the rise, and on the other, people are healthier and are remaining active. They can and want to continue contributing to society longer than before. More and more, Canadians are returning to work after retiring or are embarking on a new career after age 55. They still have a lot to give and dreams and goals to fulfil. What is more, they want to go on working in order to share their experience with other members of their community.

Business of Supply

All this comes at a good time, because we need these people. We need their experience and their valuable advice. We need their expertise and their wisdom. They have enormous potential that is just waiting to be tapped. Older workers between 55 and 64 are the largest potential source of future growth in the available workforce. We must therefore work to increase their labour force participation.

If we want to maintain our standard of living, if we want to continue to prosper as a nation, we have to make the most of the potential of all Canadians. The growth in the labour force over the past few years can be attributed mainly to older workers. Since the end of 2002, these workers have accounted for half the growth in employment in Canada, and their increased participation in the labour force is now the main reason for the increase in Canada's overall participation rate. In other words, today, Canada simply cannot allow itself to retire workers who are considered redundant.

At the same time, we have to find solutions to the shortages of workers in a number of economic sectors. Tradespeople, for example, are a rare commodity in some parts of the country, including my own riding, Mégantic—L'Érable. And this situation will only get worse in years to come.

Yet we know that there are thousands of older workers who are losing their jobs—often the only job they have had in their life—because of plant closures or a slowdown in a particular industry. Unfortunately, remote areas and those that depend on a small number of industries are hit hardest.

We have seen compelling examples in Quebec in the textile, forestry and fishery sectors. We are aware of this situation and we firmly intend to continue our efforts to help older workers to reintegrate into the labour market.

However, we do not want to adopt temporary, off the cuff measures. No, first, we want to make an overall evaluation of the situation of older people with our partners in the provinces and territories in order to identify possible solutions. Older workers have special needs that call for specific answers. We do not want to bungle the job.

In the 2006 budget, our new government has made a commitment to help those Canadians who are most affected by the impacts of the global economy, including older workers. As is mentioned in the budget, we are going to conduct a feasibility study with the participation of the provinces and territories to evaluate the measures now available or that could be available to older workers who have been laid off to help them overcome these difficulties. It could involve improved training or increased income support, through early retirement benefits for example. Nothing has been decided or discarded at this time. Everything will be taken into account.

In the meantime, older workers have not been forgotten. They continue to benefit from numerous existing programs, such as Part II of the employment insurance plan. In that regard, each year more than 80,000 older workers, men and women age 50 or older, benefit from job programs funded through the employment insurance act. For instance they are eligible for training programs, can acquire work experience and obtain financial assistance for starting their own business.

Furthermore, almost 230,000 older workers each year receive some \$1.4 billion under EI program.

• (1105)

What is more, our government is committed to spending \$400 million during the next two years to improve the long-term competitiveness of the forestry sector.

Naturally, the other tax measures announced in the budget will help older workers as much as all other Canadians.

Finally, we are concerned about the welfare of all Canadians and of older workers in particular. Because they have specific needs, we will develop specific solutions. We will ensure that the programs we propose meet their needs and that they will be able to reintegrate into the labour market and continue to contribute to the development of our beautiful country, Canada.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we are talking here about people for whom new jobs cannot be found and my colleague is talking about people who are working. This is like talking about a street when someone else was talking about the bridge. We are talking about people who cannot find new jobs. Is my colleague aware that there are miners in his region who have lost their jobs? His predecessor, Marc Boulianne, was well aware of it. Those workers, who are over 55, have had to sacrifice their homes in order to get by. Does he know that in his riding textile workers have lost their jobs and are in the same situation as the miners? Does he know that in the woodworking industry—a furniture manufacturer—there are workers who have lost their jobs? Does he know this? Those workers are 55 or over and cannot find new jobs. Does he know this? Those are the people we are talking about. Once he is aware of this and sees that they cannot find new jobs, will he vote in favour of the motion?

• (1110)

Mr. Christian Paradis: Mr. Speaker, with all due respect to my hon. colleague, he has plainly failed to grasp the thrust of my speech.

What we are saying is that there a number of things that need to be done about this program. I have personally visited plants in my riding that are experiencing a workforce shortage. Those plants want to expand, but they cannot do that because they do not have the workers they need. Workers must be mobilized to fill that need.

There are industries that are more heavily hit and industries where people cannot find new jobs. Nowhere in my speech did I say that we disagreed with this.

What has to be done, instead of having improvised measures like my colleague tends to say, is to do feasibility studies, studies in the field to find a system that works as a whole, not a program that will be cut as the previous government did. We need a program that works, a viable program that will be effective for all older workers, and I do mean all older workers.

[English]

Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am a little confused and I do need some clarification from the member.

Business of Supply

As the member is aware, this is not the first time this motion has been debated in the House. On June 9 of last year a very similar motion was put forward to the House by the Bloc Québécois, and members of the Conservative Party spoke eloquently and forcefully in support of the motion.

I listened to the member's speech and am not getting that same clarity today. He talks about an evaluation study. Of course at the end of the day on June 9, 2005, the Conservative Party supported the motion, as I did myself. I am not sensing that today. Do I take it that on June 9 the party very forcefully supported the motion and from your comments now you are not supporting the motion? If that is the case, which is very—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Again, the hon. member is using the second person.

We have a lot of people who wish to speak. The hon. member for Mégantic—L'Érable

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Paradis: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

On the contrary, this party is committed to assisting older workers at this time. That is what was said in the budget and that is what is being done at this time. The government is in the process of implementing a functional system. Before that, an analysis must be done, studies must be done. Programs cannot be established helter-skelter.

If we look at the past we see that the previous government slashed assistance measures for older workers. We know that there is a huge problem in this area. At present, measures are in place but we know that they are not adequate. There is more than one kind of older worker, but what is being done is to try to put them all in the same box, as my colleague is doing. We are aiming for effectiveness. We want a program that will be viable and that will work for the people who most need the benefits. There is unanimous agreement in this House. We want to solve the problem as it relates to older workers.

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am surprised at my colleague's answer. He said that he is looking for a solution, but POWA was one of the best and most appreciated solutions while it was running.

During that time, the program worked very well. For example, in my riding, the program was helpful when Marine Industrie, Beloit and Tioxide closed. It was also useful when small sewing workshops closed in the Saint-Ours, Yamaska and Pierreville regions.

Today, the possible closure of Norsk Hydro was announced. What am I supposed to tell those people when they ask me if there will be a program to assist workers over 55 who have no chance of finding another job? Of course, if they can go back to school, if they can change careers, we will encourage them to do so. However, it is clear that they have no opportunities and lack resources. What am I supposed to tell them when they ask me if there will be a program to assist them? Will I have to tell them what the member opposite just told us, that they are studying the matter? People do not want studies, they want action.

Mr. Christian Paradis: Mr. Speaker, it is the government's foremost responsibility to have all of the necessary information

before acting. That is what the (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development) said. Studies will help her determine the specific realities facing each region and each sector.

We want to implement a program without worrying about it being cut, which is what happened before. My colleague just listed some examples. We are familiar with these examples. We are out there and we know what is happening. Now we have to compile the information and create a program that will work and be viable.

• (1115)

[*English*]

Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, at the outset, I support the motion, however, when the government implements it, I want it to look at it as a comprehensive strategy involving other issues related to the matter. I assume the motion will pass because, as I indicated in a previous question, a very similar motion was debated by the House on June 9, 2005, and all parties unanimously supported it. I would be shocked and surprised if all members did not support the motion today.

However, there are two aspects about which I want to talk. We have to be very careful in implementing the motion. I suggest and urge the government not to add an additional disincentive to our support system, to a workforce attachment right now.

First, I urge the government, in its implementation process, to look carefully at the income support measures. This matter will require very close consultation with the provinces. I see a real gap in the income support measure for those people between 55 and 65 years of age.

I neglected to say, Mr. Speaker, that I will be splitting my time with the member of Parliament for West Nova.

I believe the government, as part of this process, should look at the income support measures for those between 55 and 65 years of age. I see a very large gap there. Currently, when people attain the age of 65, they are eligible for the guaranteed income supplement. It is not perfect. One does not live in any kind of luxury, but it is an awful lot better than the income support measures for those people between 55 and 65. A lot of them do not have pensions, they are not eligible for the Canada pension plan and they are unable to work for a whole host of reasons. It may be for health reasons or they may be unable to find a job. This is one issue that has to be looked at very closely as the motion is implemented.

Another issue has to be aligned with the motion, and that is a very comprehensive older worker strategy for Canada. We are looking at, and it has been referred to I believe by the minister, a demographic time bomb in Canada. We are looking at an acute worker shortage.

Business of Supply

This whole debate has been turned upside down over the last 15 years. Fifteen years ago I would have been in Parliament urging people in public policy to implement programs to perhaps take some of our older workers out of the workforce to make way for the 21 and 22 year olds who were looking for jobs. That is not the case now, especially in the skilled worker sector.

All sector councils across Canada have the big issue of a skilled worker shortage. The construction industry is looking for 150,000 new workers over the next 10 years. The mining industry is looking for 81,000 new workers; trucking, 40,000; and tourism, 333,000. The manufacturing industry is also looking for new workers. The list goes on and on.

This is very serious issue for governments at all levels. It will cause problems with our productivity and for our industries. It will result in workforce instability and it will drive up wage costs. In turn that will drive up the costs of projects and manufacturing goods. That will aid in an element of inflation in our system if it is not there already. Once we have that, interest rates will rise. As everyone knows, that will have a very cumulative negative effect in our economy. It will be good in the short term, but in the long term it will have very severe and negative consequences for us as a society. We can see that going on right now in certain areas of Canada. If it is allowed to continue, it will have negative repercussions.

● (1120)

If a country wants to deal with this issue, there are only certain strategies. Immigration is one of those strategies. I believe the previous government was trying to increase the number of skilled workers coming to the country. There have been some successes, but again we are competing in a world where a lot of other countries, especially the European countries, are having the very same problems we are having. It is a very competitive field out there, looking for skilled and educated immigrants.

We could attempt to increase the participation rate, but again this country's participation rate is reasonably high in international comparison. The birth rate, as everyone here knows, is approximately 1.41%. That is considerably below the replacement rate, probably two-thirds of the replacement rate. Again, as the demographics suggest, at a certain point in time, I believe 2011, there will be no further increase in the local labour market and in the year 2016 we start to drop. Once it starts to drop, it will be a very serious drop year after year. This is something that those in public policy have to be aware of and have to plan for because it is very serious.

However, my point is there has to be attached to the motion an older worker strategy. We have to develop a strategy to encourage older workers to stay in the workplace, if they want. We certainly are not going to legislate that people work. However, if they want to, we have to make it more attractive. To give an example, in Sweden and Japan approximately 90% of their workers between the ages of 55 and 65 work. In Canada it is close to 50%. That gives us an idea of what we are faced with.

Some of the issues I would look at would be training for workers in that cohort. Elimination of any suggestion of mandatory retirement has to come. There have to be changes in our tax policy. We have to make it more beneficial and attractive for older workers,

especially older workers of lower income, to stay in the workplace. Probably one of the most important public policy initiatives a government should look at is some of the benefit policies.

If I may give an example, right now probably many people over 65 years of age are receiving the guaranteed income supplement. They probably have no interest in working full time, but may be interested in working part time. They may be interested in working 10 hours a week and making \$100 or \$200. However, the way our system is, they would be almost penalized dollar for dollar, which is a very strong disincentive for them to work. That has to be looked at part of an older worker strategy.

Another area that has to be looked at is our collective agreements to accommodate certain older workers who want to get back into a unionized environment. Right now it does not lend itself to that shift.

Again, I mentioned about five or six different items and this has to form part of a strategy and it has to be a culture shift. It was not there 15 years ago, but it has to be here now. I should point that if it were successfully implemented, even that would only postpone a problem. It will not solve a problem because it would eventually catch up to us.

Some of the points I have raised are peripheral to the issue, but I support the motion. I believe and urge the government to implement the motion, but it should do so as part of the larger package involving income support for those citizens between 55 and 65 years of age. It should be a very comprehensive well thought out older worker strategy.

● (1125)

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to the member's comments and his support, both for income support for older workers and for some of the adjustment programs that need to be part and parcel of a larger package. I know the member was elected first in the year 2000. Did he advocate for those same programs at any time during the mandate of the Liberals when they had 13 years to do something about these issues?

The last time we had a program for older worker adjustment, where we did offer income support to older workers, was in 1987, when it was established. It was gutted by the Liberals in 1997. When the member was first elected, did he start advocating for those programs then? If you did, what was your government's response and its reasoning for not pursuing those programs and protecting older workers until now when you find yourself on the opposition benches urging the current government to correct your—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I would like to remind the hon. member, as I did for her colleague earlier and as I keep having to do day after day in this chamber, that we are not supposed to use the second person. I just remind the hon. member not to use the word "you" unless she is specifically referring to the Chair.

The hon. member for Charlottetown.

Business of Supply

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Speaker, I believe the member is referring to the previous program for older worker adjustment, which was cancelled in 1997. That was replaced with the older workers pilot project initiative in 1997 and was recently terminated.

I read the study on the first one. I said at the outset that whatever happens here, we cannot add in an additional disincentive to workforce attachment. I read a study produced by HRDC, analyzing 1,000 workers. There was some negative repercussions on that program. It was replaced by another program. Again, nothing is perfect.

This issue is a moving target. If I were debating this issue 15 years ago, I would be saying that we should be developing programs to get the older workers out of the workplace and get the younger ones in, but that is no longer the issue. That ground is shifting very fast.

Some initiatives have been taken, but we have to do a lot more and we have to do a lot more quickly.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I agree with my colleague on the demographic time bomb issues. If I recall some of the information that I have read, by the year 2020, we could be faced with three workers paying for social programs in a 3:1 ratio versus 5:1, which we have right now. I am very concerned about our low birth rate and some of the issues we have with that.

If we are going to retrain people and if we are going to look at policies whereby we are encouraging people to stay in the workforce, based on the pilot project being examined right now by the government, when our government does puts recommendations forward based on these pilot projects and when we have well thought out strategies and policies dealing with keeping people in the workforce, can we count on the hon. member's support for that? The hon. member said he was looking forward to well thought out programs and policies.

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Speaker, I will have to look at what the government brings forward.

To answer the member's question, this motion had his support on June 9, 2005. Therefore, I will certainly be counting on his support when the vote is taken on this motion. I will be surprised and shocked if he does not support it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened closely to the speech by my colleague from Charlottetown. I am pleased that he now agrees that we have reached the point in our economic history when the government must intervene formally and concretely, because of the change in the economic situation, which we all recognize—my colleague mentioned certain acronyms.

He also concludes that POWA, a program that we tried out with much success in the 1990s, should be implemented immediately—since we know how—and that it would be extremely beneficial for workers in the areas of softwood lumber, mining and textiles, for example, and for Norsk Hydro workers, who are feeling pressure because there is likely to be a closure soon. Former workers at Aciers inoxydables Atlas, in Sorel-Tracy, who were not able to benefit from this program, know how it feels.

The hon. member says that he will vote in favour of this motion. I am thrilled, but I am very surprised that his Conservative colleagues across the floor, who voted in favour a year ago, are now voting against it.

Is this not surprising? Perhaps it is more to stall for time, in order to introduce a new program reduced to only certain sectors of the economy, which would be most unfortunate for the others.

I believe that the program should apply to all regions and to all workers. Does the hon. member not agree with me?

• (1130)

[*English*]

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Speaker, I agree with the basic tenet of the question that there has to be a program which has to be available to all regions and all sectors, but I do not necessarily agree that it should be exactly like POWA. There were problems with that particular program.

It should be similar. It should be specifically for those workers who, for geographical or training reasons, cannot get another job, like in the situation that happened in Huntingdon, Quebec and that has happened in a lot of the outports of Newfoundland. Those are situations that government has to respond to.

Again, my answer is yes, there should be an exact program, but it should be tied in with other initiatives.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank and congratulate the hon. member for Chambly—Borduas for drawing the attention of this House to this very important matter. I congratulate him for having framed this motion that I will support and that I find quite broad. It would be impractical to approach such a vast problem from a narrow-minded perspective.

Solutions to the problems facing older workers cannot be considered without also considering the communities in which they live and where they want their families to live. The communities must have the benefit of economic growth and good potential in order to survive.

[*English*]

It is impossible to look at this in isolation. We have heard a lot of good comments on that this morning. If we break it down, income support alone does not do it and training alone does not do it. I think we have to look across the board at the community, the economy and the place where older workers and younger workers live.

The impact of closures of factories and businesses, as suggested by the motion, affects more than only one demographic segment of our communities. It affects all the communities. There has to be an approach that takes care of all this.

With income support, I think we could start at the very base. We could look at those income support programs we already have and ask if they are meeting the needs. I know that residents in my communities who are receiving the Canada pension plan or old age security are struggling. They are struggling to survive. The amounts they are receiving are not enough in today's economy. We have seen the prices. The cost of living has increased dramatically for them.

Business of Supply

If we look at the consumer price index, it does not tell the story. The consumer price index is growing very slowly. Inflation is under control. But if we look at the very basic cost of maintaining our homes and our families, we will see that non-discretionary spending has risen very quickly in the last few years.

Sure, the big items have not gone up. Automobile prices have not gone up all that much and perhaps groceries have not gone up all that much. Electronics certainly have not. However, let us look at the basic costs, such as the price of fuel, the price of heating our homes, the price of energy. Let us also look at the costs of insuring our homes and insuring our vehicles. In rural parts of the country, where a lot of these older workers live, mass transit is not an option. Mass transit is not available. It is impossible to raise a family and maintain a household without a personal vehicle. Those costs are very high.

I have heard suggestions from the governing party that since there is a surplus in the Canada pension plan and the economy is doing very well we should be accelerating a reduction in premiums. I would ask the government to consider the other side of that, the side of maintaining premiums. We have to watch it, because we do not want to choke employers and choke the economy, but I think we should be increasing benefits. The government should be increasing the amount of disposable income that is given to older workers, retirees and disabled people in this country.

I thank the member for Charlottetown for suggesting that we could look at people receiving the Canada pension plan who may be able to work for part of the year as long as they do not lose their Canada pension plan. Some of them, while they can no longer work a full time job because of chronic illness, may be able to do two or three weeks' work in a year. If there is no clawback of their Canada pension plan, this would be a benefit to their community, to their families and to them.

We see many sectors, such as the fruit growing sector and the agricultural sector, that have a chronic shortage of labour. They need a lot of labour in a very short period of time. These workers might be available at that time. It could benefit both those sectors and the workers. I think we have to be imaginative at how we look at this.

In my communities in western Nova Scotia, there has been a very serious downturn in the herring industry. It is cyclical. It will come back. It moves around. The herring quota has been reduced from 80,000 tonnes a year to 50,000 tonnes a year. A lot of people will not make EI this year.

These people are very good employees. They are able to go from one business to another. The employers have been working together to try to maximize the number of weeks that people can work. Everybody has been quite responsible, but many of the workers still will not have the required number of hours. They will not quite make it this year. Who are these people? Most of them are female. A lot of them are older, at 45-plus. They are single parents. They are one parent families. These are the people who hurt the most.

We need to have a little imagination as to what kinds of programs we could put in place. When we were in government, we had a very good program. We would create projects. They were called make-work projects, but they were always of community benefit. These people's time would be valuable. They assisted in the communities

and were rewarded for it by earning income and earning their EI insurance, and they could maintain their families.

Training is no longer available to these people. There have been cuts in the training programs. I mentioned this earlier. Three months into the year, the retraining programs and the support programs from HRDC have been cut. Literacy training has been reduced. These are the basic building blocks that people need to be able to get out there.

We are seeing people who have been displaced from the herring industry. Shaw Woods was a very good employer, and a responsible one, but because of international market conditions it had to close down. The Weymouth lumber mill has closed, and the softwood deal will not reopen it, trust me. King's processors, again because of international pressures, had to close down. Then there are the tourism industry and the agricultural industry. They are all taking hits. We see less tourists coming into Nova Scotia from the U.S. market since 9/11, a problem that will not be solved tomorrow. It is a tough problem and it affects a lot of seasonal workers. A lot of these businesses depend on students.

● (1135)

What was the reaction at HRSDC? It was to slash the student employment program. It had already been cut because of the census figures. I hear it is being cut again. An average of 70 students less per riding will find work next year. Not only are we not helping the students, we are not helping the communities. We are not helping the local communities maintain a good, vibrant economy where these older workers should, according to the minister, reintegrate into the workforce. I think we have to look at all those things.

Then there are the CAP sites. I mentioned this earlier. I was in the community of Maitland Bridge two weeks ago. It is an isolated community, next to a national park. It was big in the forestry sector. This community is losing its youth. There is no high-speed Internet access in that community. It is very important for Maitland Bridge to develop a CAP site. There are some sites 10 or 15 kilometres or more from where Maitland Bridge is, but in this community there are none. Now there is no potential of getting these sites, because that funding has not been restored. It has been cut.

It is important for us to do these things. It is important that we get broadband Internet access for all the communities. We have been able to do it for a lot of communities and we had the school program to get it into all the schools. We have it in some rural communities, but we have to get it into all rural communities if we want to protect the economy of the communities where these older workers live.

I am not calling for going back to the old ways of EI. I remember the EI trap. Rather than seeking full time work, people would sometimes get into that trap. That did not help, but we have to look at EI and make sure it is working properly.

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In my community, because of the boundary divisions that were added, with some larger communities, some urban and semi-urban communities where the unemployment rate is zero, it is assumed by Statistics Canada that the seasonal workers in my community can work year-round. Therefore, they need a large amount of work weeks to draw EI. That is not true. At those rates, they cannot be driving 400 kilometres in the morning to work and 400 kilometres back in the evening. There is no way that is going to work. I think our boundary divisions have to be a lot more reflective of the communities where these people live.

We have talked about pilot projects. It was mentioned that some of them worked well and some of them did not. We have to review them, of course, but what do we continue to hear? We hear they are being studied and studied and they are being put forward. We continue to have the same thing, those same projects. I think we have to be more imaginative than that. We have to give flexibility to the very good civil servants who work for us at HRSDC, Human Resources and Social Development Canada, who know what the potential is in those communities. They know where to make the investments and what groups understand the local economy and can create the necessary jobs and training.

Again, let me look at another point. Let me bring this back to who a lot of these older workers are in my community. Who are the people we are trying to help? A lot of them are women. They depend on and need some organization and some leadership to be fighting on their behalf, because they are in isolated communities a long way from the centre.

What do we get from this government? For one thing, it slashed the budget of the Status of Women department. That was an insult. Then, a few days later, we heard that the remaining budget cannot be given to organizations that do any lobbying, advocacy or research. We continue to have a Status of Women organization in theory, but it cannot do anything, because we know that the REAL Women group believes that the money from the Status of Women should only be used to bring people together to do some brownie recipe exchanges.

I think it is time for us to get realistic and make sure that we take care of all of the people in our fair country.

• (1140)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let us be clear about what has happened to the existing federal initiatives to help older workers since the minority Conservative government came to power: cuts, delays and inaction. One would think that if the Conservative Party were interested in standing up for Canada's older workers, it would actually recognize the invaluable contribution that older workers make to our country and would have policies that support these beliefs. Similarly, the last election platform of the Conservative Party was silent when it came to older workers.

Let us face the facts. Our population is aging and the number of older workers in this country is increasing. To remain competitive, accommodating measures are and will be required to respond to these emerging needs.

I am sure my colleague would agree with me that the minority Conservative government has paid lip service to the issue of older workers but little else. Its actions suggest that it is not at all

committed to developing a truly national older workers strategy. Instead, the government is introducing measures for a limited range of workers in a few selected regions. For the rest of Canada the government seems intent on cutting social programs despite a \$13 billion surplus which the Liberals gave it.

Since coming to power, the minority Conservative government has cut several programs aimed at assisting workers. The Conservatives have terminated the \$3.5 billion labour market partnership agreements with the provinces, slashed \$17 billion from the workplace skills strategy, axed funding for adult literacy programs, and halved funding to the Canadian apparel and textile industries.

The POWA, program for older worker adjustment, was something that was put into place in 1987 by the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney. It was targeted to help displaced older workers age 54 and over. Workers in Canada will hold the NDP accountable for its actions. They will also realize that Stephen Harper is no friend of working class Canadians—

The Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. member knows that he ought not refer to the Prime Minister by name.

He has used up a great deal of time for questions and comments so I will ask the hon. member for West Nova to respond.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Mr. Speaker, the member will know that for many years we heard the Conservatives in the House, when they sat on this side at the time, talk about the \$1 billion boondoggle. It was a self-prophetic evaluation of the work that they would do. The \$1 billion boondoggle arrived on the same day that they announced a \$13.5 billion surplus, with \$1 billion in cuts to social spending.

I heard the minister today in the House suggest there was room in the economy for a lot of these older workers, that they had to have retraining to do it in order to integrate into jobs, but at the same time cut the money for retraining those people. The government cut the money for literacy, the basic building block to help a lot of workers learn new skills, new trades, integrate into the modern economy and contribute to their communities. The money was removed.

Three months into the year at HRSDC the budget for retraining was cut. There is no money; the government could not find any money anywhere else. It found money for its priorities, but that was not a priority. With \$13.5 billion the government can finance a few priorities. The government left the workers out in the cold and is leaving them out in the cold.

I named the four large industries that are going through difficulties in my community. People have been turned away from their places of employment. Young people, middle aged and older workers are looking for ways to help their families and maintain their communities. What did they get from the government? Cuts.

• (1145)

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to quote what was said by the parliamentary secretary to the minister of social development in the past government. The particular Liberal minister at the time sat around the cabinet table and the parliamentary secretary stated:

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In the course of his speech, he said that the government wants workers of a certain age to stay home.

The Liberals were being accused of wanting to suggest that women stay home and bake cookies, I guess as was talked about by the other member. The parliamentary secretary went on to state:

That is not the case at all. Quite the contrary...[the Liberal government] want people to work. We do not want them to stay home and cash cheques. We want to create opportunities for them.

In a past Parliament on June 9, 2005 that is how the parliamentary secretary to the minister of social development in the Liberal government responded to the accusations that are being made of the Conservative government by the member.

I would like a comment from the member, please.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Mr. Speaker, I share the position outlined. That is what we want to do. We want to make sure that the Government of Canada assists older workers, younger workers, all workers to achieve their potential. We will not do that by cutting the programs that help them do that. We will not do it by eliminating literacy training. We will not do it by cutting retraining, by eliminating CAP sites, investments in infrastructure in those communities. That is the last way to do those things.

Certainly we want to help them. Absolutely. We will maintain that and that is why we will form government again after the next election.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Denise Savoie (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to take part in this debate. I am going to share my time with the member for Hamilton Mountain.

I congratulate the member for Chambly—Borduas on this motion. I know that this is a subject he cares a lot about. I have listened to him tell us some very disturbing stories about older workers who were laid off and did not manage to find themselves a job.

We, the New Democrats, strongly support the idea of an income support program for older workers from all regions and all realms of activity. The member is right to persist and to place pressure on the government. We all have to exert pressure so that the government will act in order to help these workers who lose their jobs as the result of factory shutdowns or slowdowns in some sector, whether forestry or fisheries. As an example, in British Columbia we are surely going to witness sawmill closures on account of this bad softwood lumber agreement.

We also believe that older workers who lose their jobs should be entitled to training and have access to courses, if appropriate. This is why the New Democrats are pushing for a lifelong learning strategy to be developed. This means having the possibility of continuing to contribute one's talents, skills, energy and the wisdom one may have acquired at a certain age for as long as possible to Canadian society.

In my opinion, this motion does not talk about those workers who are fit for work and who could be retrained in some way or another. It must be recognized that workers aged between 55 and 64—which is the age bracket preceding retirement—have greater difficulties. It is not just a matter of taking a little course, as proposed by the Conservatives, to succeed in getting a job. What people get are casual, low-paying jobs, if they manage to get those.

As this motion proposes, older workers require a specific program that will meet their needs, providing them with extra income, rather than relegating them to welfare with all the stigmas associated with that. We are told that the economy is strong and the labour market has never been so flourishing. But even in such a context older workers who are laid off, regardless of their skills and work experience, find themselves confronted with a big challenge.

• (1150)

[*English*]

Victoria has one of the lowest unemployment rates in Canada and even at that, the food banks have never been so busy. I have had the occasion to visit the food banks and often I see workers in their fifties who are there without resources, often homeless. There is something indecent about this situation. It requires action, not more studies.

One woman came to my office in Victoria. She is 56. She has taken several retraining courses. She finds herself faced with unemployment and obliged to rely on welfare. I wonder what the government would tell that worker, that woman in Victoria.

In Canada we recognize the importance of allowing people who are aging to live in dignity. We provide the Canada pension plan, the old age pension and the guaranteed income supplement.

[*Translation*]

Parliament also passed an NDP motion to protect the rights of older people. Although the motion passed, the government has not taken any action to develop legislation. We must continue pressing the government to ensure that these people are also protected.

We are speaking today about a demographic group that does not reap these benefits: older workers who were laid off but are too young to retire and face serious difficulty finding another job. What do we do? Do we just ignore them when many have paid employment insurance premiums for their entire lives?

When the Liberals were in power, they tightened the eligibility requirements for employment insurance to such an extent that now only 60% of the people who lose their jobs qualify for benefits.

Prior to 1997, of course, there was an adjustment program for older workers that was instituted in 1988 and then abolished. It was administered by the provinces but 70% of the funding came from the federal government. This program enabled older workers between 55 and 64 years of age who had lost their jobs as a result of major layoffs to receive benefits. This program no longer exists. However, we know that the governments in Ottawa and Quebec are currently working on a pilot program to support older workers affected by factory closings in various parts of Quebec. This is an example of federal-provincial cooperation that is directly related to the needs of the province. The federal government is helping to ensure that vulnerable Canadians are treated fairly.

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I believe that we should do the same in other areas, such as literacy, rather than slashing these programs as the Conservative government just did. We even heard the Treasury Board president say that it was a waste of money to invest in adults and we should invest in children instead. Investing in our children is a fine idea, but setting the needs of adults against those of children is complete madness. Adults have major literacy needs, and they deserve a program and funding.

The support program that I mentioned for Ottawa-Quebec workers is supposed to be only for people 55 years of age or older working in the forest and textile sectors.

The NDP believes we need a system for all older workers of all income levels coming from any region or any industry. We need a Canada-wide strategy for older workers that reflects their right to live in dignity. They should have an opportunity to continue developing their skills. I believe that Canadian society would have much to gain from their contribution.

• (1155)

[English]

By neglecting older workers, by standing still on this issue and by concentrating solely on what they can contribute to the economy and not to our society as a whole, we are missing the boat.

The government has blinders on when it simply wants to focus on economic value without considering the serious poverty issues that many of these workers face at that age. Many of them have spent a lifetime working, for whatever reason, and, in some cases, have had to leave school early to support their families. Whether they were involved in the fisheries or forestry, because of the problems in those sectors they find themselves unemployed and having a difficult time finding other jobs.

In many cases, there is the possibility of upgrading and skills training, but again we see the Conservative government abandoning and cutting many of the programs, certainly in Victoria where their transitioning or re-entry was facilitated through literacy programs and CAP. These programs have simply been put aside.

I would ask the government to reconsider the case of workers between the ages of 55 and 64 and support the motion before us.

• (1200)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government has allowed programs for older workers to sunset, but at the same time, the President of the Treasury Board needlessly slashed \$17 million from the workplace skills strategy program as part of his vindictive and ideological \$1 billion cut to some of Canada's most vulnerable programs.

In the last Liberal budget in 2005, there was an additional investment of \$125 million over the three year program. In contrast, the first Conservative budget laid the groundwork for its destruction.

Workers in Canada will know and will hold the NDP responsible for its actions in 2006.

The member said that the government has blinders on. I am just wondering if the member would not agree with me that the NDP members had blinders on when they voted to take the last Liberal

government down. Now all of a sudden they turn around and say that they have seen the light.

If they have seen the light, then they certainly will see the light that the Conservative government is a slash and burn government that does not give a damn about older workers.

Ms. Denise Savoie: Mr. Speaker, the more I listen to the debates on both sides of this House, the more I realize that a Liberal equals a Conservative on literacy programs. What the Liberals offered was \$1 per Canadian a year on literacy. In some cases, many of the literacy programs were already cut by the Liberals and the hatchet job was simply finished by the Conservatives.

The member needs to remember that it was Canadians who realized that there was some serious corruption in the Liberal government and ended that. However, he is giving the NDP a lot of power by suggesting that 19 members were able to bring down the Liberal government. I thank him for recognizing that we are all that powerful.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would remind my hon. colleague that we are supposed to be talking about older workers and unemployment. If she wants to talk about literacy, I can tell her that we have a slate of programs and money dedicated toward literacy that will be effective. We are hoping that members opposite will help us with the older worker issue.

With respect to older workers, I want to talk about what is happening in other areas. Alberta and B.C. are desperately in need of workers in the construction and welding sectors. Recently, P.E.I. had to hire foreign workers to work in several fish plants. It is a well-known fact that Canada is suffering from a severe labour shortage.

How can the hon. member support a motion that would keep older workers, a valuable resource, out of the Canadian workforce? If we suggest a program that only targets older workers, how will we meet some of the labour shortages that we have as well?

I would like to bring the debate back to unemployment, unemployment insurance and older workers and ask the member to define what her debate is about today. If it is about literacy, then perhaps we could save that for another time. I would like to talk about older workers who would like to remain in the workforce. What would she do with those people who do not want early retirement? How would she fill the serious labour shortages?

Ms. Denise Savoie: Mr. Speaker, I recognize that the debate today is about unemployment and the problems we face. I was talking about the conditions that help workers address those issues, and certainly one of them is literacy.

Business of Supply

Workers are not widgets, as some of the Conservatives would like to suggest, that one can move from one part of the country to another. As I understand it, the debate today is about older workers who are simply not able, because of the situation, to take retraining, or those who face tremendous obstacles in finding new employment at 56 or 57 years of age after a whole career—

• (1205)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Hamilton Mountain.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to speak in the House today to one of the most urgent issues in the new Canadian economy, income support for older workers. I want to speak to this issue from two perspectives. First, as the NDP critic for seniors and pensions, and second, as the member of Parliament for Hamilton Mountain.

Let me begin by painting a picture of what is happening in my hometown of Hamilton. Most members in this legislature will think of Hamilton as steel town, a city that has built its reputation from a strong and vibrant industrial and manufacturing sector. Not so long ago that picture would have been accurate. However, members may be surprised to learn that the largest employer in Hamilton today is neither Stelco nor Dofasco, but rather the service sector and, in particular, health care.

Let me take moment to describe what has been happening in Hamilton. The old industrial manufacturing economy of Hamilton has shrunk to but a ghost of its former self. The two big steel companies that used to employ over 30,000 people now employ about 6,000. The whole steel sector, which, as I said earlier, was the backbone of Hamilton's economy, is now about one-quarter of its former size.

In the steel sector alone we have lost 3,248 jobs in just the past five years from 35 companies. Some of the losses were from bankruptcies and plant closures, while others are the result of continuous downsizing where there are still more losses to come as the nature of the industrial marketplace changes in the global economy.

Unfortunately, the job losses did not begin and end with the steel industry. We lost Studebaker, International Harvester, Westinghouse, Proctor & Gamble, J.I. Case, Firestone and hundreds of smaller plants. These are just some of the big names from Hamilton's past. Sadly, the list of losses is still growing.

More recent ones that pop to mind, again from just the past five years, are Siemens Westinghouse with 332 layoffs, and Camco where 716 lost their jobs when the plant closed and 284 more workers ended up on temporary layoff. The Tiercon plant closure saw another 700 jobs lost and there were bankruptcies and plant closures at Rheem, Philip Environmental, Hercules, Mak Steel, Frost Fence, Dominion Castings, Cold Metal Products, and ACI Automotives. New permanent layoffs are happening every month in the industrial manufacturing sector in Hamilton and there is no end in sight.

I started out by referring to the old industrial manufacturing economy in Hamilton and I did that for a reason. This is a sector of the economy that is not growing and is not creating jobs. For the

most part, the companies in this sector are very old and they have a very senior workforce. Of the workers losing their jobs at these plants as they close and downsize, 60% or 70% of them are older workers and, in part, they have been displaced as a result of government policies.

Yes, technological changes had a profound impact on the nature of the workplace, but so have policies such as free trade agreements that were first put in place by the Mulroney Conservatives and then expanded under the Liberals.

One would think that successive governments might have assumed some responsibility for addressing the unique issues confronting older workers in Canada and, to be fair, the Conservatives did act on at least one aspect of older worker assistance in 1987 by introducing the program for older worker adjustment which gave income support to workers between the ages of 55 and 64 who had lost their jobs as part of a mass layoff. The program was not perfect but it did allow over 12,000 displaced older workers with poor re-employment prospects to bridge the gap between layoff and retirement.

Unfortunately, the Liberals dismantled the program in 1997 without offering in its place a better alternative. Essentially, the Liberals wrote off older workers as inevitable casualties of structural change in the Canadian economy. Today we have the opportunity to right that fundamental wrong and providing income support to older workers is an important step in that direction. However, it should not be the only step.

Many older workers who lose their jobs want or must continue to participate in the labour force. This is especially true in instances where job losses are the result of bankruptcies. In these cases, workers often lose not just their jobs, but also their anticipated pension benefits and back wages.

It is precisely for those reasons that I introduced Bill C-270, the workers first bill, earlier this year which would ensure that benefits owed to workers will take super-priority over all other creditors in cases of commercial bankruptcy. All of us in the House who take seriously the issue of income support to older workers, no doubt support this legislation. I look forward to my bill receiving full support when it comes to a vote in the House.

• (1210)

Many older workers need to find new re-employment, but they face a number of unique and serious barriers to their job search. Let me review just some of those barriers. First, there is a bias toward high skills in today's demand for labour. This is a huge problem for displaced low skilled workers especially those residing in parts of the country where opportunities for re-employment are very limited.

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As a nation Canada has never had a culture of workplace based learning. This must change. If employers actually invested in the continuous updating of skills and education for their workforce, not only would they benefit from increases in productivity and profitability but our country as a whole would benefit by ensuring that displaced workers would have the skills necessary to participate in the increasingly high tech economy.

I am not suggesting that the onus for training should only fall on employers. The government too has an important role to play in promoting life long learning. However, instead of taking that role seriously, the government is actually responsible for many of the barriers that undermine skills training.

Just last week we saw the government cut funding support for literacy training. Yet, we know that 40% of working age Canadians have limited literacy and numeracy skills, and that even these skills atrophy from lack of use in some workplaces. This has had a profoundly negative impact on the re-employment prospects of Canadian workers.

Similarly, the government's employment insurance system does little to encourage workers to participate in skills upgrading. On the contrary, it sets up barriers.

If our public policies did more than pay lip service to help unemployed workers, we would be fast-tracking older workers to programs for skills upgrading, retraining or real career change options. Instead, the EI system forces them to go out and spend time doing a useless job search for several months in the same sector from which they have just been laid off and in which layoffs are continuing, just so that they can prove that they cannot be rehired in that sector with their present skill set.

Why are we putting the onus on workers to prove the obvious? While they are doing what the government demands, they are getting frustrated and demoralized, and even worse, they are using up a huge portion of their EI benefits in this fruitless process. When EI is finally ready to consider these older workers for some kind of retraining, it then makes the process such a bureaucratic nightmare that it actually drives workers away. Even those who stick out the application process find that the majority of them get turned down for training. Only a very small number of those interested in skills training actually get to proceed.

Clearly, EI reform needs to complement income support programs if we want to deal effectively with the displacement of older workers in today's economy.

Finally, we must look at the economy as a whole. I have already said that the free trade agreements have had a profoundly negative impact on high paying industrial and manufacturing jobs in our country. The current softwood sellout that is being so actively promoted by the current Conservative government will have the same devastating impact on the workers, families and communities affected in the forestry sector.

It is time that we stop making our economic decisions based on what is best for the United States. It is shameful that we do not have a steel sector strategy in this country. We desperately need an auto sector strategy. There is profound economic potential in developing a green industry strategy.

Instead of pursuing any of these initiatives with any real interest, we have had successive Liberal and Conservative governments throw up their hands and stand idly by as high paying industrial jobs are replaced with service sector jobs at half the rate of pay or less.

Those who suffer the most are those who built our country, the older Canadian workers, whose labour drove our economy and whose taxes built the social infrastructure like our health care system that defines us as a nation. Older Canadians deserve more from their government and they deserve it now.

I am proud to support the creation of real income support for older workers.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my colleague's comments. Philosophically, everyone is willing to assist and ready to assist people who need help.

However, I have a number of questions. First of all, older workers have a lower unemployment rate than the workforce in total. Does the member know how many older workers would be assisted by this proposal? How many unemployed older workers are there in Canada currently? Has anyone looked at what the cost of this real income support program across Canada would be?

• (1215)

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I have been listening to the debate all morning and I have heard Conservative speaker after Conservative speaker say that the government is undertaking a very comprehensive feasibility study to answer precisely the member's question, so I would encourage him to have a chat with the minister, as she too is still looking for those answers.

Let me suggest to the hon. member that Nero fiddled while Rome burned. I understand that his party is looking for a new strategy to deal with older displaced workers, but while it is doing that, we have thousands of seniors who need income support as his party is groping about looking for new programs that would provide real retraining opportunities.

I urge the government to do its research quickly and not let the issues just lie on the back burner as its Liberal predecessors did, and do the right thing for older workers by starting with an income support program.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to start by commending our colleagues from Victoria and Hamilton Mountain on the quality of their presentations and thank them for supporting the Bloc Québécois motion I introduced this morning.

Before putting a question myself, I will answer the question of our Conservative colleague. We are talking about \$50 million the first year and \$75 million in subsequent years out of a total budget of \$16 billion. I had the opportunity to repeat these figures a few times this morning, and the minister should have them.

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My question is for my hon. colleague from Hamilton Mountain. In Quebec, older workers who run out of EI end up on welfare. Not before having exhausted their assets, though. For example, a recipient who owns a house worth more than \$80,000 will see his or her benefits reduced accordingly. This also applies to a small cottage. Property has to be sold and the proceeds used up before people can qualify for welfare benefits.

I would like my hon. colleague to tell us whether similar constraints exist in her province and whether getting support is as difficult there.

At the same time, I would like to point out to her that the funding that should normally be allocated to the POWA is being withheld by the federal government, and the provinces end up having to support these older people.

[*English*]

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely right. Certainly, the same system of social assistance would be available to older workers in my community of Hamilton and across Ontario as it is in Quebec. However, the reality for these older workers is that we should not be forcing them onto social assistance. That is not what the system was designed for.

We talk about allowing older workers to retire with dignity and respect. We are forcing people to become Wal-Mart greeters instead of being able to actually fill the high paying positions they have been trained to do, which they have been doing all of their lives.

The plant closures in Hamilton that I outlined in my speech are not closures that were being forced onto those companies by the workers. The government has a responsibility for implementing policies that protect workers in tandem with the policies that it implements that displace those workers.

That is what the hon. member's motion is asking for. That is what we, on this side of the House, are supporting, and we join him in urging the government to stop putting displaced workers on the back burner and to start dealing with this very urgent issue today.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Brome—Missisquoi to speak to the motion of the Bloc Québécois put forward by the member for Chambly—Borduas, whom I congratulate.

The motion states:

That the House reiterate to the government the importance of implementing a real income support program for older workers that would apply to all older workers in all economic sectors, in all regions.

Today, I wish to speak for all those who are affected by this situation. I heard some Conservative members ask if these people had not found any work and why not. Today, these people are listening to us. Two years ago in my riding of Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, the Whirlpool plant laid off at least 100 workers aged 55 and over. Some found work. The majority did everything they could to find work. There are jobs available, but the reality is that these people do not necessarily have the skills suited to the task. We know that you have to work with new technologies today. Very competent individuals who had a job at a

company for many years are not necessarily able to automatically find another job. Furthermore, employers do not readily hire someone who is 58 or 60 years old, even if this person needs the income.

Today I speak on behalf of Gilles, Michel, Clément and others who came to see me the day after the 2004 election. They were the first group I met with in Montmagny, in the new riding I represented. I told them at the time that we would do whatever we could to ensure that a program for older workers is put in place.

On the one hand, it is a good thing to have programs that make it possible for people to find jobs. We should make it easier for them to do that. On the other hand, however, there is the reality that this government has so far consistently denied. No solution is being proposed for the people who cannot find new jobs.

This is not a problem in my riding alone. It is a new reality that has come with globalization and expanded trade. Great. We are all pleased to see globalization and expanded trade. If it helps economic activity, so much the better. There are winners and there are losers, however. The government's responsibility is to ensure that there is an appropriate distribution of wealth. When we invest, when we increase productivity, when we give an investment credit or allow accelerated depreciation, often, when it comes to jobs, there are people who are victims. We have to find a solution so that those people get their share of the increased productivity and the profit. That is called an assistance program for older workers.

We started calling for this a long time ago. We called for it in the last election campaign. The leader of the Bloc Québécois came to Montmagny and made a commitment to make this a priority in Parliament. We have been on the government's case since that time and we will continue to be until an appropriate program, a program that meets people's needs, is put in place.

First, we had an amendment made to the throne speech so that it referred to the problem of older workers. Then we had a statement included in the budget saying that the government intended to act.

We have been told about feasibility studies. That was really not going far enough. The people affected by this situation have been living with it for six months or a year. They are experiencing hardship and they are having to deal with social problems. There have even been suicides. These people are anxious for the government to do something concrete. So far, we have not yet been given that commitment, but we are back on the government's case today with a motion in which every word is important.

We are asking "that the House reiterate to the government..." because the government has been aware of the need to act for a long time. We have seen the examples. Proposals have been made, particularly by the union organizations in Quebec, proposals that included very reasonable terms. We are not talking about having an open bar and making it so that everybody has access to this program if they have not done what they need to do to find a job. When the situation has reached the point that it has now, however, if there are people who are not able to find new jobs, then they really have to be given what they need to move on.

Business of Supply

The program has to cover all older workers. We must not start segregating people. I challenge my colleagues in this House to give me a guarantee that in the next six months or over the next year there will be no plant in their ridings that is affected by closures connected with globalization, and there will be no workers who have devoted their lives to a business and brought up their families and now find themselves unemployed. All they are being given at present is a maximum of 45 weeks of employment insurance. These people have often paid into employment insurance for 20 or 25 or 30 years and when their 45 weeks are up they find themselves with nothing.

The program therefore has to cover all older workers, men and women, who are living in these situations.

● (1220)

The textile industry is a good example. At Saint-Pamphile in my riding, Industries Troie employed 150 women who had worked in this sector for a number of years. They worked for a vibrant employer, but imports from China came in like a tsunami.

Since the government had not implemented relevant measures, jobs were swept away. Among the workers affected by the job losses, some are older and are having a hard time finding a new job. They must be eligible for this type of program, no matter which economic sector they worked in.

Today the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology is addressing the issue of the manufacturing sector. Globalization is presenting Quebec and Canada's businesses in the manufacturing sector with an extraordinary challenge in that it has become very difficult to compete with all the products that come from abroad. We have to implement what we need to address this. When a company closes its doors, the workers who are victims of this situation, in all economic sectors, have to be treated fairly. That is the intention of the Bloc motion.

Deliberate leaks from the Conservative Party have indicated that this could affect the forestry and textile sectors. Nonetheless, we also have to think about the furniture sector as well.

Week after week, more plants announce they are closing and they are not necessarily all from the same sector. Will people in the Quebec City area who work in the shoe industry be excluded? Will we include a company from a region with low unemployment that has suddenly been hit hard by this type of closure?

The motion states, “— all older workers in all economic sectors, in all regions”.

It is important that this motion be passed today in this House and I hope it will be passed unanimously. If that is not the case, I hope it will obtain a majority of the votes. Then the government will know that the time for discussion is over. We can no longer tolerate waiting for this or that to be completed or for the proper figures or data to be released.

The minister should adopt the same attitude that she took during our recent battle on transitional measures for employment insurance, when we fought to maintain the five weeks of additional benefits for seasonal workers. Now, we are concerned about older workers. Let the minister do as she has done on other issues. After hemming and

having she could give agree to a program that would affect all workers in all regions and in all employment sectors.

Our economy and the efficiency of our society can be measured by our gross domestic product, but also through the distribution of our riches. In that respect, our society does not often achieve a passing mark.

There are a great many reasons for making sure that we proceed. I will give you one example that caused me to reflect seriously and which left me with a heavy heart. Last week we learned that as of March 31, 2006, the surplus stood at \$13 billion. Of that amount, \$2 billion came from the employment insurance fund and had been used to reduce the debt.

In our ridings, the people who are dealing with this reality—estimated at \$75 million for all of Canada—felt that instead of paying down the debt more quickly, it would have been better to devote some of that money to the program we are discussing today.

The creation of a program for older workers would have represented \$75 million of the \$13 billion surplus. Nobody would have noticed. People would have been better off. They could have been treated like workers who have done their share for society. Now that they are near retirement, they will be entitled to the old age security pension when they reach age 65. They will also be eligible for the Quebec pension plan. However, for the next two or three years it will be a painful struggle, because at the age of 56 or 57, they will be forced to make withdrawals from their RRSPs and to sell their assets. This will create a terrible injustice. Some people who are supporting a family may not be able to carry on.

Faced with this reality, it is absolutely essential that this House adopt this motion. The Conservatives must understand that this issue goes beyond statistics. If the Conservative members go back to their ridings, they will probably see people of 55, 56 or 58 years of age who, despite all their efforts to find new work and despite the low rate of unemployment, are not able to find a job. These people deserve the support of their government, which is what this motion calls for. For that reason, the Bloc Québécois motion should receive overwhelming support.

● (1225)

[*English*]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a quote from a Bloc member in the previous House debate on older workers. I would appreciate a comment from the member after hearing it. He said:

[Older workers] do not want to live on EI benefits and even less on welfare payments. They want us to support them so they can upgrade their skills, start a business, or find a new job.

In that respect, would it be more useful to expand the wording of today's motion to include employment supports?

Business of Supply

[Translation]

Mr. Paul Crête: That is precisely what is unacceptable, this guilt put on older workers by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development. Such remarks are totally unacceptable.

We are not saying that people should not work or get training. There is something quite hypocritical about cutting funding for literacy and, the very same week, the parliamentary secretary across the way suggesting that the members of the Bloc Québécois do not feel that training should be provided to these people.

The parliamentary secretary and the government have to understand. In Quebec and Canada, older workers want to work, they want to have an income. Those who will be eligible for the part of the program that will help them until retirement are people who contributed to society for decades and now have the misfortune of not having a job anymore. The hon. parliamentary secretary has to recognize that, and stop making these people feel guilty, as was done previously with the unemployed.

• (1230)

[English]

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I was impressed with the hon. member's very passionate speech about older workers.

The minority Conservative government slashed \$17.7 million in funding for literacy programs, describing them as wasteful. People in my riding of Newton—North Delta are disturbed by these cuts because they will affect them on a large scale.

How do these cuts resonate in the member's riding?

[Translation]

Mr. Paul Crête: Mr. Speaker, these are all symptoms of the same problem. This government is making people feel guilty because of its perception that anything short of a total market economy and free competition cannot make the economy run smoothly.

This kind of talk has not been heard since the days before the Great Depression of the 1930s. At the time, the Republicans in the United States were saying that the government should not spend any money, that it should not get involved in anything. Then, the United States sank into recession, followed by the rest of North America and the entire planet, but there was no cause for alarm, they said. We were all headed for a brick wall.

The Conservatives' attitude is the same today when they cut funding for literacy. Naturally, in my riding, people enroll in such classes because they need to be able to read. Yet we have heard that grants between \$25,000 and \$30,000 for such an organization are being cut suddenly. People are expected to be able to skate without even being provided with skates. They are not able to get into the game.

In a nutshell, this is one tool and POWA is another key tool.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I really enjoyed the member's statement. What he said about budget cuts was important. On the one hand, we have a Conservative government that is giving a billion dollars in subsidies to the oil industry, one of the most profitable industries in Canada,

and on the other, we are seeing cuts to programs for workers, women and aboriginals. What the Conservatives have done is really unhealthy.

We really need a program to help older workers. No such program is currently available. There is nothing for workers.

I would like to ask the member, who has a lot of experience in this House, if he thinks this government understands the impact of its actions over the last few months, and especially since last week.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): There are 15 seconds remaining for the response.

Mr. Paul Crête: Mr. Speaker, I think the government is a victim of its own ideological credo, which has led to cuts that the ministers themselves did not even know about just four days before they were announced. Today, the Conservatives have an opportunity to make amends by doing the right thing and voting for the Bloc motion.

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup for sharing his time with me and for giving such a fine presentation that really explores the problems facing older workers.

I would also like to thank my colleague from Chambly—Borduas who introduced this motion and so keenly defended it.

This morning, the minister told this House that Canada is experiencing a growth in employment and, as a result, we do not need to help older workers. It is completely absurd to link the number of jobs to the fact that older workers cannot find work.

The minister acknowledged that losing jobs also has a domino effect in the community. This is true, and we know that people who become impoverished at 57 or 58, and who have lost everything, cannot contribute to their community, far from it. Money given to people who have worked all their lives thus helps the entire community and even helps younger people find new jobs.

This morning, the minister said that people would retire more universally if there were a program such as POWA. On the contrary, people want to work. If they suddenly stop working and receive assistance from a program such as POWA, it would be because no other solution is available to them. People do not want to live off POWA. They would prefer to have a real salary. The minister must realize this.

Business of Supply

I got the impression that the minister had not gone to see what was happening in the field. She does not know the people these measures are designed for. She is mistaken when she thinks that assistance programs for learning new skills will apply to these individuals. It is very seldom possible to retrain them. She is even talking about new careers. Come on. Men and women who have worked 18, 20, 25, 27 or 28 years for the same company have become experts at their jobs and cannot be readily retrained. They have skills, which they learned on the job. In general, workers in the textile, furniture, lumber and soon the rug industry—since the problem of the rug industry is getting dangerously close to my riding—cannot easily learn another trade or start another career, contrary to what the minister may imagine. Why? Because they have very little education.

My colleague from Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup has just said that people are often illiterate. They have lots of knowledge and have acquired extraordinary expertise. They are professionals in their job. But they have a grade two, grade three, or grade four education. Some have a hard time reading. So they cannot easily begin another career at an advanced age. How can anyone think that it is possible, when it is not?

I will take the example of my father-in-law, a typical man, who spent his life working for Goodyear, in textiles, and who became an expert. This man did not have an education. He had maybe gone to school for two or three years, and then he had to work after the war because he came from a large family.

In Quebec, there are still large families. Some people still leave the country to go and work in factories, where they get their training. They become open-minded and capable people who can help others. My father-in-law even became a foreman. But at age 57 or 58, he could not find a job elsewhere. It was impossible. He did not have the knowledge required.

Someone who changes jobs every five or ten years is mobile, and so is his head. He can easily find employment in other fields. As the minister said, he can enter an assistance program and possibly start another career. But people who have done the same job their whole life long find this hard to imagine and are not able to easily find another way of working and living.

For these people, POWA is therefore absolutely necessary. It cannot be replaced.

My riding has many workers. Unlike the minister, I meet with them and talk with them.

• (1235)

I meet with these people, I talk to them, and I know how much they would like to work, how much they would like to find another job. But this is impossible, because these people specialize in just one area, so there is less work for them, or else none at all.

For example, CSBS, the former CT Brooks company in Magog, is currently restructuring. Every week, it is laying people off or rehiring. Why? Because we are facing huge competition from China, a phenomenon that could be described as dumping. The definition of dumping is giving things to a company free of charge. In China, the government is giving companies land, not charging them tax on equipment, lending them money at preferential rates and giving them

tax breaks. This is dumping, because the selling price is less than the production cost.

But the government has never done anything about this. With the WTO, it could have put up barriers over the past 10 years, as the United States has done. There was also NAFTA, and because we are big exporters to the United States, we were hamstrung.

CSBS is a textile plant that is experiencing huge problems, and it is not alone. This morning, the local papers in my riding reported that Consoltex, a textile company in Cowansville, my own city, wants to cut its employees' wages, vacation and benefits, because it is in financial difficulty. Just imagine, if the employees refuse a wage cut that will leave them with starvation wages, the company will close. This will be one more closure that will leave textile experts out of work. The younger workers will be able to find new jobs, of course, but those who are 55 or older will have a tough time finding work.

All the national unions in Quebec and the local unions support us. I have met with them personally, and they are all in favour of assistance for people 55 and over, because they know that these people cannot find new jobs, that they cannot embark on a new career as easily as the minister may think.

We absolutely must help manufacturing companies that are having trouble surviving and we must realize that this is a humanitarian issue. We cannot ask the international community to help our older workers aged 55 and over. It is up to the government to help them. I am convinced that the assistance requested is not an inordinate amount for the government and that it represents peanuts when compared to the total budget.

However, it is very important because half of Quebec's industries have lost 100,000 jobs over the past 10 years. In my riding, thousands of jobs are being lost. These workers cannot be placed as readily as we would like or hope.

Furthermore, we have opened our borders which has created even more difficulties. These conditions did not exist 20 or 25 years ago. They are new conditions and we now need a plan to directly and immediately meet the needs of those aged 55 and over.

We can be certain that older workers will prefer to continue to work or to find another job rather than to receive assistance under POWA.

POWA is like first aid or a safety net that will prevent workers from suffering psychologically and from having their health adversely affected. Money not invested in POWA will be spent to maintain workers' psychological and physical health.

The government can spend in one area or the other. I prefer to have healthy men and women who are no longer employed than to spend money on health care to keep them going to the end of their days. In my opinion, POWA must be established immediately.

Business of Supply

• (1240)

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first, on this issue, I am shocked to find that I am considered an older worker. I am in that age group. In all seriousness, this is an important issue.

In some areas of Canada there are low levels of unemployment and there is ample opportunity for employment in many communities where older workers do not need access to income supports. In fact, 44% of unemployed older workers live outside of censused metropolitan areas.

Thus, how does the Bloc motion take into account different situations in the labour market right across Canada?

• (1245)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my hon. colleague for asking this question because it gives me an opportunity to talk about what is happening in my riding and then to elaborate on the question.

In my riding, there are job losses and job creation as well. A great number of jobs are generated. There is job creation in high technology companies and job creation in sectors where materials are produced and then shipped directly to the United States or Europe.

In my riding a lot of jobs are created; so that is not the problem. The problem is that people 55 and older cannot be retrained or take these jobs because they lack the knowledge or adaptability to do so. They were never shown that they could do something else. Therefore they have no options even though new plants in my riding are hiring. These workers cannot take these jobs because they lack the skills to work in these factories. The same thing is going on all across Quebec.

This summer I travelled across Canada and I made the same observations. Even in Edmonton there are unemployed people. Workers do not stay long in Edmonton because when they get there and realize they do not have the sought after special skills, they leave. The principle of communicating vessels does not apply here. In other words, when someone 55 or older is laid off, this does not create a new job opening. This is not an automatic process. Some workers find other jobs, but it is far from automatic.

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from the Bloc Québécois for his remarks, with which I agree in large part. I am aware that the Bloc has been touring in Quebec's regions to gain support for its demands for a new POWA, and I cannot say that I disagree with that.

The fact is, however, that a program established by the federal government in 1999 has already been in place for seven years now; I am referring to the OWPPI, an initiative to help older workers get back into the workforce.

During the Bloc Québécois' tours of Quebec, did the hon. member make this new program, or new take on a program first established in 1999, known to his constituents?

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for her excellent question because, when I meet with labour unions in my riding, that is one of the things we talk about. This is indeed an interesting and worthwhile program, but, as I said earlier, it does not do much to find work for people who cannot be easily retrained, if at all.

That is why both programs are necessary: one to help workers find a new job, and also one for those who cannot find a job because they are too specialized in their field and, beyond a certain age, cannot even imagine themselves doing something else.

[*English*]

Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I will be splitting my time with my colleague from Palliser.

[*Translation*]

I want to thank the hon. member for Chambly—Borduas for this proposal and I hope he realizes that our government is committed to ensuring that older workers remain active and have an important place in the working population of Canada.

[*English*]

I want to remind the member to start with that and remind the House about our 2006 budget where we made a commitment to the feasibility study that would review the current and potential measures aimed at addressing the challenges faced by unemployed older workers. I think that is recognizing the importance of implementing real programs that do support our older workers.

One element of that feasibility study will be the close examination of how we can assist our older workers going forward into the future. We have learned some lessons from the older workers' pilot program. I reflect back on the comments made by the minister this morning in her discussion and I want to point to three of those which really stuck in my mind about future programs being helpful.

One of those is that 100% wage subsidies were least effective. Second, relating to training, there has to be sufficient time for older participants to learn new skills and training must be practical and relevant. Third, a long term approach will allow for a more effective use of the funds.

Having efficient and effective programs for older workers will have a direct impact in my riding of Tobique—Mactaquac. For example, just in the last couple of years we have experienced the closing of the Nackawic Pulp & Paper Mill in a small, one-industry town. Thankfully, this past January that mill reopened, putting almost 300 people back to work. Thomas Equipment, a longtime equipment manufacturer in Centreville, New Brunswick, just closed mere weeks ago.

I have met and talked with a number of those individuals directly impacted by those events, and a great many fall in the category of older workers who I think is the key group that is envisioned by the member for Chambly—Borduas.

Business of Supply

As a bridge to developing these new programs, we also have our temporary income support programs. We had a significant discussion on this with respect to our workers at Thomas Equipment in Centreville. One part is our pure income support that we offer from EI, which acts as a bridge between employment assignments. The second part is the additional benefits, such as training, work experience and support, in some cases, to become self-employed.

These programs give all people, including older workers, the opportunity, when out of work, to upgrade their skills to make them employable. There has been a tremendous amount of effort and a number of these people have benefited from the \$1.4 billion in income benefits annually.

However, in addition to considering income support, we must also look at the range of options for helping people to be employable. I say the word "employable" because that is an important word. Personally, I believe making people employable is a responsibility that is shared, not only by the government but by corporations.

I go back to my examples of the closures in my riding. I think we are past the time when any organization can guarantee employment for life. However, as good corporate citizens, I believe we must ensure that people continue to be employable. That concept holds true for older workers who want to remain as active participants in the workforce.

The experience that older workers possess represents a great untapped resource to improve economic conditions in cities, towns and regions across the country. Brad Donnelly, of Manpower Professional in New Brunswick, recently stated, "Seniors are educated. They are alert and are an asset to the workforce. Why do we want to implement programs that would take them out of the workforce?"

The importance of older workers to the labour market and the economy in our country cannot be understated. We all know we have an aging population and it means that we are suffering significant labour shortages. We heard a number of comments on that point in the House this morning. The effects of those shortages are already being felt in my home province of New Brunswick where a recent *Moncton Times & Transcript* story stated that in more and more workplaces across the province, lengthy vacancies in positions that pay good salaries have human resources specialists scratching their heads.

We are also seeing this in our fall harvest season in the riding of Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC) where older workers and even some seniors are playing a significant role in this year's harvest because of the shortage of people to bring in this year's potato crop.

However, we are not alone in facing these economic pressures. Other countries around the world are facing the same pressures and are looking at several options to boost labour market participation.

• (1250)

One of the strong recommendations is to remove incentives that would encourage workers to take an early exit from the labour market. In Canada, as we have all seen, older workers have become a principal source of labour force growth in recent years. As the Canadian population ages, encouraging the participation of older

workers will play an important role in ensuring growth and rising living standards.

In short, programs that contain only income support are not the answer. They may be one part of the foundation of this new house we are going to build, but they cannot be the only part.

As Judy Cutler of the Canadian Association of Retired Persons observed, older people are much more active. They are ready to get at it and ready to get out working. I can point to my father-in-law, who constantly reminds me every day of the 20 times that he mowed my lawn this summer. He gets up in the morning and has much more energy than even his favourite son-in-law, which is what he calls me.

However, we recognize that older workers left jobless due to plant closures or downsizing in single industry communities do have greater difficulty participating in the labour market and face longer spells of unemployment. There are many causes of this, such as careers in declining industries, living in remote locations and lower rates of mobility. Any combination of these factors tends to magnify an unemployment rate for a single industry community. I can point to some of the small towns and villages in my community that are very reliant on the forest industry, which is very up and down at this time.

Clearly, a plan that assists older workers in improving their skills serves a dual purpose. It increases their potential for integrating into the workforce and also contributes to the country's labour market and economic growth. As others have mentioned, what is worth emphasizing is that increased participation rates among persons aged 50 to 64 should be a central objective of an older worker policy.

The member for Charlottetown commented about it this morning. He said that income support is not the answer and that we need to take a broader strategy. I could not agree more. That is why I believe this motion is much too narrow for the House to support.

We should be gearing programs to older workers with the tools they need to remain employable. They should not act as a disincentive to labour market participation, skills upgrading or relocation. These programs also need to be focused, including on communities that are one industry towns and villages. We will miss the mark if we put this in all regions and all economic sectors, because that does not reflect the reality of our current environment.

In conclusion, we are finding ways to make this happen. We are endeavouring to do this with a host of partners. It will be a partnership among ourselves, industry, and the provinces and territories to help older unemployed workers find and keep jobs in today's labour market. We are sensitive to the needs of older workers, as clearly evidenced by our many programs and our commitment to a feasibility study.

I can point to a situation in my home riding, where there is a significant multicultural component. Our settlement funding will allow many of the folks who have come in from South America to be productive workers in our communities in Tobique—Mactaquac.

Business of Supply

While I appreciate and share the concern of the member for Chambly—Borduas for older workers, it would be premature to support such a broad motion. This government must look carefully at the complex economic and demographic environment. We must complete our feasibility study before taking long term action.

Rest assured, however, that we will continue to support our older workers through present programs. We do not want to make hasty decisions. We want to find the right long term solution for older workers while keeping in mind the current economic and labour market conditions at the forefront of this decision making process.

• (1255)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member seems to paint a picture of some action on this file, but I think the record will show that in both the last Conservative platform and their 2005 official policy declaration there was no mention whatsoever of older workers. It seems to be a new interest of the Conservatives now that they have formed a minority government.

In fact, the Prime Minister has long argued against such policies. On September 25, the Prime Minister confirmed to the House that he would announce a new program for older workers and that this will follow the feasibility study the member indicated in his speech. However, it should be noted that there was absolutely no money included in the 2006 budget for older workers.

I have questions for the member. Is this simply a matter of words? Where is the money?

Mr. Mike Allen: Mr. Speaker, what we can say is that in budget 2006 we did commit to this. We have committed to our employment insurance programs. We have committed to the five week program, which is a strong program for New Brunswick and affects one of the areas of my riding.

I also want to comment, as I pointed out earlier, that there is a significant amount of money in our settlement funding, which brings in a lot of new workers and immigrants. We know that as our population gets older we need to supplement those resources with our immigration forces. Those dollars are being spent well, toward settlement funding as well as training and education for those workers. The moneys are there to create an environment for this. We will take those measures.

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his comments. He discussed something that we have not talked about very much: how much easier it is for educated people to find new jobs.

Under certain circumstances, this can happen when a person lives in a region where there are a lot of jobs that coincide with his or her skills or university training.

I would also note that, in the regions, employment possibilities are limited. Take Rivière-du-Loup, for example, which brings me to the question I would like to ask my colleague. In Rivière-du-Loup, there are about a hundred workers over 55 who are having trouble finding jobs because there are no new jobs for them.

Take the worker who was 55 years old when the business he worked for closed. He upgraded his skills. He is a very educated person, in good health, and available for work. Over the course of a year, he applied for 92 jobs throughout the region. Because he was 57, only one employer invited him to an interview, but he was not hired.

This is the reality we have to be aware of. Does my colleague realize that this is what we are talking about it? If he does, will he support the motion?

[*English*]

Mr. Mike Allen: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's comment. In fact, it is interesting to hear the member bring up this situation because I have one of those situations of my own in Tobique—Mactaquac, in Nackawic, with a person who is around 57 or 58 years old and is in a similar position.

I think that as part of this we said that income support should be just one portion of the foundation, not the entire foundation, as I said. We are not ruling out a place for some things like that as part of an overall strategy, but that cannot be the only thing.

My concern is that with this being just income support, we have actually gone away from a program that was cut in 1997 and which offered much more than that. I think the member opposite said we should go back to a program like that.

Mr. Dave Batters (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to have this opportunity to respond to the motion presented by the member for Chambly—Borduas, which proposes the implementation of an income support program to assist older workers in all economic sectors and in all regions of this country.

I can assure the House that Canada's new government shares the hon. member's concern about the challenges faced by older workers in Canada.

As the Prime Minister emphasized recently, our nation needs older workers in the labour force if we are to maintain a strong and healthy economy. We recognize that Canadian workers have a great wealth of skills and experience to contribute to the labour market. It is therefore absolutely critical for the well-being of the nation and the well-being of older workers that we find ways to keep them in the labour force and maximize our use of their knowledge, expertise and diverse skill sets. Allow me to expand on why this is an increasingly pressing issue.

Like all OECD countries, Canada is facing the challenge of an aging population as a result of a declining birth rate and increased life expectancy. This resultant slowing of labour force growth means that we will be seeing skill shortages in key industries and occupations in regions across the country. I am sure all members know that these shortages could have a negative effect on GDP per capita growth and hence the standard of living of all Canadians.

If employment rates by age group and gender remain at current levels, Canada's labour force will increase by less than 5% over the next 50 years, compared to the 200% growth that took place between 1950 and the turn of the century.

Business of Supply

It is a remarkable and revealing fact that older workers in Canada have become our principal source of labour force growth in recent years. Between 1995 and 2005, their participation in the labour force saw an increase of 11%. There is no doubt that this recent reversal of the long decline in the labour force participation rate for older workers is good news for them and for our nation.

Nevertheless, older workers' participation in the labour force is still far below the rate for so-called prime age workers. In 2005, the older workers' labour force participation rate was 58%, as opposed to 87% for prime age workers. The difference between the two rates represents a tremendous loss of skills and expertise from which our labour force could greatly benefit.

Looking to the future, we see that the potential of older workers is even greater. Between 2000 and 2020, the portion of our population aged 55 to 64 will increase by about 50%. Given the economic repercussions of a declining labour force, we simply cannot afford to let older workers' skills and experience go unused. This is an issue the government is committed to tackling.

We are very aware of the particular challenges that older workers encounter when they try to rejoin the labour market after an early exit, and certainly we are very sympathetic to their plight. We know, for example, that recent closures and layoffs in the textile and pulp and paper industries have affected a large number of older workers and that some older Canadians have difficulty re-entering the workforce. These are challenges we are working to resolve.

As this House is aware, under part II of the Employment Insurance Act, unemployed Canadians, including older workers, may qualify for active re-employment benefits to help them find and keep new employment. These programs range from training and skills upgrading to work experience and support in becoming self-employed. I am pleased to inform the House that over 80,000 older workers over the age of 50 participated in EI part II programs last year.

As I noted earlier, we believe, as the OECD suggests, that optimizing older workers' participation in the labour market is one of the best means we have to offset the decline in labour force growth that we and many other nations are experiencing.

• (1305)

It is for all these reasons that budget 2006 provided \$400 million in funding to the forestry sector to assist Canadians affected by global economic adjustments. This is also why we are conducting a feasibility study to evaluate current and potential measures to address the challenges faced by displaced older workers. These challenges include such diverse options as the need for improved training and the possibility of enhanced income support. The feasibility study will also provide recommendations on how we can best assist older workers over the long term.

In the meantime we are continuing to address the challenges of unemployed older workers. We will continue to focus on offering laid off workers, including older workers, assistance such as opportunities for skills development and new work experience. As part of this process we will be building on lessons learned from government pilot projects specifically designed to meet older workers' needs. The older workers pilot projects initiative, carried

out between 1999 to May of this year, showed us for example that the best outcomes were achieved through approaches that combined employment assistance services like job counselling and job placement services with training, marketing and job experience.

Participants in the older workers pilot projects made it clear that older workers wanted training that was practical and relevant. I believe that determination illustrates just how much older workers in Canada want to continue to contribute to our economy in a practical and concrete way that makes the most of their abilities.

The government is well aware of the many solutions available to mitigate the slowdown in labour force growth, such as increased immigration, but it appears that one of the most practical and viable solutions is to access the untapped potential of our older workers. If the participation rates for Canadians aged 50 years to 64 years were to increase on average just one-half of a percentage point each year, we could increase labour supply by 13% by 2030.

These statistics tell a story of tremendous potential that is critical to the future prosperity of the nation.

In summary, I am confident that the government's feasibility study will help us to arrive at the best possible solutions for ensuring the crucial potential of older workers is realized now and in the decades to come. For this reason, I am unable to support the motion presented by the member for Chambly—Borduas. Perhaps there will be some amendments. I look forward to members' questions.

• (1310)

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I picked up on one particular aspect of the member's comments which was that he would like to see the supply of older workers in the labour market increase.

I would ask the member if, by way of incentives, he thinks that the government should cut income taxes and allow income splitting so that senior citizens are taxed less on their marginal income.

Mr. Dave Batters: Mr. Speaker, this government is extremely proud of the measures that we have already undertaken, especially in budget 2006, to reduce income taxes for all Canadians. We are extremely proud of that. All Canadians have benefited and certainly older workers have benefited.

I say through you, Mr. Speaker, to my friend opposite, stay tuned for more good news in terms of allowing Canadians to keep more of their hard-earned money, because frankly that is what this government is all about.

Regarding the income-splitting suggestion, I am sure Minister Flaherty will take that comment under advisement—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The Minister of Finance is the man to whom you were referring, I suppose.

Mr. Dave Batters: Mr. Speaker, yes, of course, the Minister of Finance I am sure will take that suggestion to heart.

Business of Supply

Anything basically that we can do to limit the tax burden of Canadians, that is what this government is aiming to do. Certainly that benefits all older workers and indeed, the entire country.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. member why older workers are being encouraged to remain active in the labour market.

Mr. Dave Batters: Mr. Speaker, I think the parliamentary secretary certainly appreciates the importance of keeping older workers engaged in the labour market. There are strong indications that older workers can and want to work longer, if only on a part time basis. Older workers provide a valuable contribution to the labour market which is important to the economic well-being of this country. I covered that at length in my speech.

In light of Canada's aging population and growing labour shortages in various sectors of the economy, it is essential to provide tools and opportunities to help experienced workers stay active in the labour force. It is critical for this country.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind the House that the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities—of which the parliamentary secretary is a member—is currently reviewing the employability issue. As members of the Bloc Québécois, we are making a positive contribution to this work to enable older workers to keep working as long as possible.

But that is not the issue here. Let us be perfectly clear. This is about people who, because of regional and employment constraints, cannot find a new job. Again, I ask my colleague: Is he aware that people are experiencing these difficulties? If he is, will he vote in favour of this motion to help them?

● (1315)

[English]

Mr. Dave Batters: Mr. Speaker, government members on this side of the House believe in older workers. We believe in giving them choices and empowering older workers through training and skills development to enable them to get back into the workforce. Of course we are very sympathetic to the plight of older workers who are trying to rejoin the workforce. We are going to help them in every way possible because we recognize the important role that older workers play in Canada and the tremendous contribution they make. I covered that in my speech. It is critical to the success of our country.

In my riding of Palliser a pork plant employing 300 people, Worldwide Pork, declared bankruptcy. It has reconstituted itself into a company called Moose Jaw Pork Packers. It is going through some difficulties right now and is adjusting its business plan.

I have talked to people like Lawrence Peverette in Moose Jaw who called me repeatedly to talk about the plight of people who were thrown into unemployment, not just so-called prime age workers but older workers as well.

I am very sympathetic. I talked repeatedly with the minister and with the parliamentary secretary as to how the government could best help these people. They were very receptive to hearing the story

of the people at Moose Jaw Pork Packers. We are doing everything we can on this side of the House to help displaced workers.

We believe this is a huge opportunity for this country in terms of helping to address the labour shortages. Older workers are a critical part of our labour force and our economy. We in this government are going to do everything we can to stand behind these individuals.

The member asked if I can support his motion. Not as it currently stands. There are far too many unknowns. I sat here and listened with interest this morning. We do not have a price tag put on this motion. It is a pretty important thing that we address all the costs involved. I will listen with great interest though if there are any amendments put forward.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am going to be sharing my time with the distinguished member for Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour.

I feel very ambivalent about addressing the House today on the Bloc Québécois motion on its opposition day.

On the one hand, I am pleased to have the privilege of stating how important I feel it is to institute a real income support program for older workers that would apply to all older workers in all economic sectors in all regions.

On the other hand, I am disappointed to have to explain once again to the elected members of this House—especially the government members—how important and urgent it is to have a program like the one stipulated in the motion.

Maybe it is necessary at this point to tell the people watching us on television all they need to know in order to understand the relentless struggle that the Bloc Québécois and the workers and labour unions of Quebec have waged since 1997 to institute an older worker support program. Actually, it would be more accurate to speak of restoring the program.

Such a program used to exist and is not completely new. The 1988 program provided for benefits to be paid to eligible workers between 55 and 64 years of age who had lost their jobs as a result of major, permanent layoffs. In this way, the gap was bridged between employment insurance benefits and the pension plan. Under the Liberal reign, with the hon. member for LaSalle—Émard as finance minister, this program was terminated in 1997.

It was a shared-cost program: 70% was covered by the federal government and 30% by the participating provinces. Since its disappearance in March 1997, there has not been any income support program for older workers victimized by mass layoffs or factory closings.

The Bloc Québécois worked very hard on many occasions in the last Parliament to have a support program instituted for older workers.

Business of Supply

I remember a motion introduced by the Bloc Québécois in June 2005 asking for a strategy to help older workers who lose their jobs, which would have included income support. The Liberals, who were in power at the time, did nothing.

In April 2006, the elected members of this House unanimously passed an amendment to the amendment of the Speech from the Throne, introduced by the Bloc, which had the same thrust as the motion of June 2005.

Since last spring, the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development has been telling us about a feasibility study whose results are still unknown. For several weeks, the minister has kept older workers in Quebec, who are in despair after losing their jobs, holding their breath by saying she will make an announcement shortly. A member of her staff, probably for lack of any substance, told that to callers to his office who have been waiting for good news. He kept them holding their breath by saying that announcements and programs were on the way. He encouraged them to be patient. His lack of professional ethics even led him to tell desperate workers in my riding not to be discouraged that he would be glad to join them for a coffee in Huntingdon to celebrate the occasion.

This situation cannot go on. It is inhuman. The Minister of Human Resources and Social Development must put an end to this horrible suspense. The government must, as the Bloc Québécois insists, introduce a real program of income support for older workers that will apply to all older workers in all sectors of economic activity in all regions, as set out in our motion.

● (1320)

I would like now to talk about the situation of people, residents, taxpayers, textile workers of the town of Huntingdon, in my riding, who lost their jobs through the closing of six textile plants on December 13, 2004. Those closings resulted in the loss of 800 jobs, affecting 70%—I repeat, 70%—of the working population of the municipality of Huntingdon. More than 100 older workers lost their jobs—in particular, workers age 55 and older—and today they find themselves with no prospects.

For the benefit of the people who are listening to us and watching us on television, it is important to emphasize that the textile and clothing industry is in a crisis. The industry must adapt to a trading environment that has changed dramatically in recent years. On December 31, 2004, the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing, which had been in force since 1995, came to an end. The end of this agreement meant that the borders of Canada and Quebec are more open to imports, especially imports from China, which are growing sharply.

I am not telling you anything you do not already know, Mr. Speaker, when I say that it is the federal government that is responsible for opening our borders.

And the United States, the most important market for Quebec exports, has signed a series of agreements to facilitate the entry into that country of clothing made abroad out of American fabric, resulting in a corresponding reduction in access for clothing manufactured using Quebec textiles.

I want to talk about the older textile workers at Huntingdon in particular, to show through these very concrete examples how urgent

it is that the government do something. Concrete examples are good ways of illustrating that beyond our parliamentary debates, beyond the studies that are not being done, beyond the ready-made answers from the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development during question period—things that mean nothing to the people of Huntingdon—there are people, right now as I am speaking to you, who are living in a degrading and humiliating situation.

Those people, older textile workers, have been abandoned and they are now disappointed and disillusioned. They wanted to believe the Conservatives, who had promised them the assistance they were asking for, but they quickly changed their tune when they saw the real face of the government—a government that has abandoned older workers to their fate just as the previous one did. They have realized that the Bloc Québécois is the only party fighting for them, the only party that is making their voices heard in the House of Commons.

Since I was elected I have worked hard with the older textile workers of Huntingdon and with all of the stakeholders in the community, which has mobilized around the tragic situation of the people affected by the textile plant closures where they live.

These citizens, these older workers, are asking only to be able to work and to get their dignity back.

Large numbers of these textile workers made efforts to find new jobs. Some of them took training courses and some of them found work with other companies, but unfortunately a majority of the older workers have been unable to find another job, largely because of their age.

This is not a matter of paying people to do nothing. That idea is going around right now and it is very insulting to these citizens who have worked all their lives and who have contributed all their lives to the development of Quebec and Canada. We have got to realize that large numbers of older workers, workers who are 55 and over, are not employers' first choice. How much frustration, disappointment and humiliation will they have to live with, because while they know that they have the experience and the desire, employers do not pick them, preferring the younger and healthier workers who are available over them.

I am sorry to say that it seems clear that in addition to being victimized by global agreements negotiated over their heads, older workers are being victimized by a kind of ageism as well.

● (1325)

This is a reality that does not seem—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): We now move to questions and comments. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment.

[English]

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments and the commitment of the hon. member.

I personally have a little difficulty with the term “older worker”. I am 56, so I find myself in that category. I do not consider myself old. Mr. Speaker, I do not consider you to be old. Many of my colleagues here who are in that age group, I do not consider to be old.

Business of Supply

I went to university. I took some criminal courses and found it fascinating. Members cannot understand that feeling. I found that most of the students, and we did not call them older students, we called them mature students, were in this age group. We have heard some comments, which are a little bit over the top, that if we are in this age group, we are not able to learn. That is utter nonsense. People in this age group are very capable of learning. If people find themselves in a situation where they need help, the government does want to provide that help.

The motion before us says:

That the House reiterate to the government the importance of implementing a real income support program for older workers that would apply to all older workers in all economic sectors, in all regions.

The definition is so tight that it makes it difficult to support. There are different areas of Canada that have different dynamics in economics, in job availability, and in retraining availability. Would the member be willing to slightly change that motion by inserting the word “displaced”? So instead of the motion saying “all older workers”, and I could be considered an older worker, it would say “all displaced older workers”. Would there be an appetite to look at an amendment?

• (1330)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from across the floor for his question.

I personally visited a textile factory and met women and men aged 56 to 59 who have been working 35 or 40 years in that factory. They use the term “older worker” themselves. After having worked hard in a physical job, for a scant salary and meagre benefits, these people do not present themselves as young, healthy workers. However, I must emphasize something very important, which is that older workers have a wealth of skills and experience, and for the most part, want to work. But with the job market as competitive as it is, employers generally prefer not to hire workers aged 55 and older.

In my riding, there is a 59-year-old man with considerable experience whose main source of self-worth is his work. For him, his whole life is his work. He is intelligent, knows many people and is resourceful. He attended approximately 35 interviews and no one will hire him. He has received all the training and retraining he can, yet despite all his efforts and all the government’s efforts to help him reintegrate into the job market, he has not been successful.

The program we are proposing is intended precisely for these individuals who, despite their best efforts, and all their energy, intelligence and skills, cannot reintegrate into the workforce because of their age.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member for Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe for a short question.

Mr. Brian Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this will be a short question and it has to do with the regions of this country. In our region there are many more older persons than in other parts of the country. I suspect it is the same way for rural regions in Quebec.

In light of the Conservatives not putting any money in the 2006 budget for older persons and with the cancellation of the older workers pilot projects which delivered \$55 million over their duration in May of this year, so what the minister is saying is that the Conservatives are doing nothing for older persons. Does the hon. member think it will adversely affect the region?

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The time allocated to the hon. member for Beauharnois—Salaberry has expired, but I will grant him 20 seconds more.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Speaker, I thank you for your generosity.

In reply to my colleague’s question, I live in a region where there are many one-industry towns.

The Bloc Québécois wants this program because it wants to support older workers aged 55 and over who are the victims of massive layoffs. This program is important to all regions where workers have been affected by such layoffs.

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to take part in this debate. First of all I would like to congratulate my colleague, the member for Beauharnois—Salaberry, who just made an exceptional speech providing a very good overview of the situation of older workers and clearly indicating the need for the POWA program.

I would like to look at the problem from a different perspective. But first I would like to indicate that there are high expectations for this program in my riding. For example, in a few weeks Norsk Hydro in Bécancour may close. The company has let it be known that it will shut down if the plant is not sold. Thus, older workers will be unemployed at the age of 55, 58 or 60 and, as my colleague has explained, will have little chance of finding another job.

Naturally, all manner of training will be provided, resumes will be mailed everywhere and the union, the company and Human Resources Canada will lend their support. Nevertheless, if it all leads to nothing, they will need the help of POWA. What shocks me about the attitude of the Conservative members on the other side is that this program had been implemented previously and had already proven itself.

I have seen the program in action in my riding. For example, I remember the workers at Marine Industrie. The program benefited 300 workers, at least 60 of whom had a grade three education. Try to retrain someone who has repeated the same actions in a factory for 30 or 35 years and ask that person to learn a new technology. That is what is so terrible. At the time, these people were able to receive support. The same happened at Tioxide and Beloit when those plants closed. In the riding neighbouring mine, Sidbec-Dosco suffered dramatic job losses, and POWA was implemented.

This program has been tested in other plants such as Soreltext and Kuchibel and in smaller companies in towns like Saint-Ours, Yamaska, Pierreville and Nicolet. And that is just in my riding. Other ridings have also benefited from POWA. For years, employers, unions, communities and municipal, provincial and federal politicians have clamoured for this program.

Business of Supply

When I listened to the speech by the member for Mégantic—L'Érable this morning, what I heard was that they were going to study the data and set up more committees to look at which program would be best. What the member for Mégantic—L'Érable is telling the people who work in the mines in his riding is that the government could not care less about them; it is busy conducting studies. The government has forgotten about the workers in the textile plants in his riding who are crying out for this program.

These Conservatives from Quebec claimed that they were coming here and effectively representing the people of Quebec, the people in their ridings, by bringing in new ideas. They said that they were going to help workers in difficulty, that there would be initiatives and programs for them.

When they were in opposition, the Conservatives who had voted with the Bloc in favour of a motion on POWA said that they were going to grow in numbers. They said that once they were in power, they would be able to implement POWA. The Bloc could talk about it, but they were going to be able to implement it.

Today, the members from Quebec who made those claims are sitting with their heads down, not daring to say a word. Their way of exercising true power is to stay silent and abandon helpless workers who have lost their jobs.

I was shocked to hear the member for Mégantic—L'Érable say, head held high, that it was not necessary right now, and that we need to study the issue.

Where are the members for Lévis—Bellechasse, Louis-Hébert, Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, and Beauport—Limoilou? Where are the ministers from Beauce, Jonquière, Pontiac, and Saint-Laurent? Will they rise to speak on behalf of the workers, to say that yes, this is the right thing to do, to say they will implement a POWA program and invest a few million dollars to help those who need help?

They say we need consultations. Did the government consult anyone when it decided to spend \$17 billion on military equipment?

• (1335)

Did it consult anyone then? Did it consult anyone when it decided to extend the mission in Afghanistan? It made the decision in a single motion, without warning, without consulting the population, without consulting the House and without debate. It was ready. But it has nothing to offer to workers who need help.

A few weeks ago, when the government cut a billion dollars from women's groups, when it cut a billion dollars from literacy—from those who need it most—did it consult anyone? Did it form committees? Did it conduct studies? No, it did not. Yet it is still studying the matter of helping workers and wants to take all the time necessary.

An hon. member: You are being cynical.

Mr. Louis Plamondon: Of course I am being cynical.

I call upon the 10 Conservative members from Quebec to tell them that they are breaking their promises. They claimed that they would address the needs of workers once in power, but are now silent. I see them across from me, with their heads down, not daring to rise,

perhaps because they do not have permission from their party to do so. Rather, they are here to make cuts. They are here to allocate funding for military equipment and for all sorts of programs except for those to help those who need help. Above all, they are here to make cuts that affect the most vulnerable. But we will have more to say about this during the next election.

In closing, the income support program for older workers—so thoroughly explained by my colleague earlier—is not a luxury.

This does not constitute excessive spending. This is purely common sense: a government recognizes that its citizens who have worked 30 or 40 years in a factory did so in good faith and with all the goodwill in the world. It recognizes them by supporting them for a time, if, unfortunately, the economy goes through a slump. All the better if these workers find another job. If they cannot find one, the government will support them to age 60, and with the pension plan to age 65, so that these workers can continue to live with dignity.

That is the general idea of the program. When I hear Conservative members say that this is not urgent, that they are going to conduct studies, this reveals where their real priorities are.

• (1340)

[*English*]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, does the motion take into account the issue of shared jurisdiction because the members on our side of the House take it into consideration? They think the Canadian labour market is an area of both federal and provincial jurisdiction. The motion does not speak to any cost sharing mechanism between provinces and the federal government.

We are the federal government. Therefore, the government members he cited, from his province of Quebec, are not taking into consideration that we are a federal government making decisions on a federal program, trying to help all Canadians who have to be employed and re-employed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: Mr. Speaker, I know this is a federal-provincial program. However, I would like to inform the hon. member who just spoke that the three political parties in Quebec's National assembly are unanimously calling on the federal government to reinstate an older workers support program. The Government of Quebec is prepared to do its part.

An older workers support program is subject to agreement with each province. If a particular province does not want the program that is not a problem; they will not have one. However, in Quebec, all the political parties are unanimously calling for this program and the necessary funding to be invested for its implementation. All that is missing is a decision and a few million dollars from the federal government.

[*English*]

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to commend the motion and the debate going forward in the House today. I sat with the member for Chambly—Borduas on several committees in regard to this issue. I fully expected the Bloc to put forward a motion on this. My intention is to support it.

Business of Supply

I come from a coastal area of Nova Scotia. There are a great number of fishing communities within my constituency. The fishery in communities like Canso, Louisbourg and Cheticamp has gone through a tremendous amount of change over the last number of years. Some older workers have grown up in the fishery. They have the need, the want and the ability to move forward and receive training. Others feel fear, despair and have very little hope. The older workers pilot project in the past provided older workers with extra training and they went on to other opportunities. I see merit in this motion going forward today.

It will come down to one thing however. I am very disappointed with the position of the government on this. The cancellation of the literacy program and others are of great concern to older workers. I am coming in late on this debate, but I would like to know this. I know what it costs to do nothing for these workers, but has a costing been done on this initiative?

• (1345)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member asked exactly the right question.

Right now, it may be necessary to spend a few million dollars for the POWA program, but what will happen if nothing is done?

The psychological and physical impact on individuals will be much greater. However, there will also be a very serious economic impact on the provincial government and the federal government. We all benefit when our workers have a decent basic income. This money does not just get stuffed in their pockets; they put it back into the economy every time they go to the garage, the corner store or buy the basic necessities.

The government puts money in the economy. Some of this money comes back to it and ensures that these people can live in dignity for a few years until they reach retirement. That is all this is about. It seems so obvious to me.

It is odd that these Conservative members who had voted in favour of a similar motion are today unable to see the value in this motion.

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will split my time with the hon. member for Halifax West.

I am rising today to take part in the debate on the motion presented by the hon. member for Chambly—Borduas.

As was mentioned by the member who spoke before me, the Liberals support the underlying principle of the motion. The official opposition supports the motion, because we believe in the fundamental rights of all workers, and particularly the rights of Canadian workers who are over 55. These workers get laid off more frequently, their jobs may become obsolete because of new technologies, or they may find themselves out of work because companies are going bankrupt in some sectors of the economy.

Many workers who are over 55 face prejudice when they apply for a job, because employers feel they are overqualified. These workers are not hired because the experience that they have gained over the years works against them.

According to a study released by Statistics Canada in May 2005, 39% of workers aged 56 and over are less likely to find a job than Canadian workers in general. I know that the member opposite does not think that a 55 year old person is old, but many employers do. This anomaly can be explained partly by the fact that employers may discriminate against older workers and may prefer to train younger people, so that the investment made will benefit them in the much longer term.

Members from both sides of the House will agree that holding a job has a significant impact on people's dignity and self-confidence, particularly when they have a family. Being part of the labour force is important to an individual, because it allows him to understand his environment and, to a lesser extent, the world in which he lives.

That is precisely why, from 1999 to 2005, the previous Liberal government invested \$55 million in initiatives involving pilot projects for older workers. This was meant to be the basis of what could have been an income support program that would meet the needs of a very vulnerable group.

The Liberal government undertook these national pilot projects because we discovered upon taking power that the programs were not very well thought through and unfair to older workers. The programs instituted by the previous Conservative government under Mr. Mulroney applied only to sectors in which there had been a lot of layoffs. The needs of the country as a whole were totally ignored because not all provinces and regions could access the programs, despite regional disparities in the supply of jobs for older workers.

Studies show that retirement may now be a thing of the past. Canadians may have to work until they are 70 years old, not because they want to, in some cases, but because the gaps in the workforce will be so large that employers will no longer be able to engage in the kind of discrimination against older workers that I was talking about earlier based on the fact that they may be overqualified or do not have the technological knowledge or the tools to function in what is increasingly a knowledge-based society. Older workers want retraining. That is why the Liberals had these pilot projects.

Innumerable men and women have knocked on my riding office door in Laval—Les Îles to tell me that they had been let go. In some cases, they held quite senior management positions. Now, unfortunately, they found themselves unemployed and did not know where to turn. They tried to retrain but still were not offered any jobs, even though they had a lot of experience.

Of the 125 projects across all of Canada, 74 were in Quebec. This means that 60% of all the subsidized projects for older workers were in my province. We got about \$21 million of the funds allocated for new training and other employment needs. However, the Liberals did not just ignore the rest of Canada, as the Conservatives are doing, because we work for all Canadians, regardless of where they live.

Business of Supply

• (1350)

Last year, the Liberal government allocated \$5 million to extend the program until May 2006, for a total of \$55 million. Now, unfortunately, this program no longer exists. The Conservative government also has not given any indication of how it is going to use the results of the Liberal pilot projects and put them toward longer-term projects, even though the Conservative government promised to do so in the last throne speech.

We on this side of the House still hope that the new Conservative government will undertake a well-intentioned study of these pilot projects before eliminating them. People do not want a program that will not meet the needs of all Canadians.

If I still have a few minutes, I would like to speak briefly about other Liberal investments in working people. Among other programs, I would like to speak very, very much—because it is so important—about the Canadian workplace skills strategy. The Liberal government instituted this strategy in 2004 to help working people upgrade their knowledge in order to keep up with a workplace that is constantly changing, we must admit.

In the 2005 budget, the Liberals added new credits of \$125 million, over a three-year period. Today, the new Conservative government announced a \$17 million cut in the funding for the Canadian workplace skills strategy, as part of its \$1 billion budget cuts. And then, as the Bloc Québécois member pointed out, there is this other \$17.7 million. This is that much less money available for literacy programs.

Earlier this week, I mentioned in the House that in Quebec, according to statistics, almost 50% of Quebecers aged to 16 to 65 do not have the reading skills required to fully function in our society. This is despite the fact that the government has surpluses in excess of \$13 billion. Once again, older workers may end up being ignored by this government.

Is this the Conservatives' idea of a responsible government? Is this the Conservatives' idea of standing up for these people?

I will conclude by asking Bloc Québécois members to elaborate on their vision of an income support program for older workers. While the purpose of this motion may be laudable, and I agree that it is, its wording is not specific enough regarding the workings of such a support program.

• (1355)

[English]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I was listening to the hon. member speak, I could not help but hear her say that they had programs for all Canadians. I would ask her to think about this. Some areas in Canada have lower levels of unemployment and ample opportunities for employment. Older workers in those communities do not need access to income supports as there are opportunities for work. In fact, 44% of unemployed older workers live outside of censused metropolitan areas.

Thus, how does this motion take the different situations in the labour market across Canada into account and into consideration?

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Mr. Speaker, I really do not see where the question leads us.

[Translation]

The Liberal government met the needs that existed in the past and that still exist now. When such needs are non-existent or few, we adjust accordingly.

Clearly, the Liberal government's program and pilot projects were indeed Canada-wide initiatives, so as to have the flexibility to adjust to the various conditions prevailing across the country.

Now, I doubt very much that there are regions where older workers have absolutely no problems at all. In my riding of Laval—Les Îles, the City of Laval is a thriving community where people work and raise families, and where many jobs are available. Yet, I know of hundreds of workers who wanted to continue to work but could not do so because they were over 55.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Laval—Les Îles almost spoke to me directly in her questions on the strategic framework of the motion. I would say to her the following.

The motion as presented is of the same order as that prepared by the Standing Committee on Human Resources and Skills Development, which my colleague chaired. It was passed unanimously. Why? Because the parameters remained to be defined. It is not up to the House to define them, but the House must nonetheless be made aware—she is right—of what an income support benefit should consist in for older workers for example. In this case, our guide is the equivalent of an employment insurance benefit, which is currently half an employee's income, but we are asking that it be 60% of the employee's income.

I would also like my colleague to indicate whether she agrees with what I am saying and whether she will support my motion in its current form.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member for Laval—Les Îles for a short answer.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Mr. Speaker, I will be very brief.

I said at the very start—unless I forgot—but I think in my speech I showed my enthusiasm for the Bloc Québécois motion and I certainly intend to vote in favour of this motion.

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have the following question for my colleague from Laval—Les Îles.

She mentioned all the pilot projects the Liberals had implemented, but the only project, the only thing we are asking for is the POWA. The very POWA they abolished in 1997 whose reinstatement we have been calling for ever since.

What is preventing its reinstatement after so many government studies? There should be an answer to that.

• (1400)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member for Laval—Les Îles for a very short answer.

Statements by Members

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Mr. Speaker, I would just like to say that I think this is not the time to discuss the whys and wherefores of something that happened in the past.

In addition, I would tell my illustrious colleague to pose the question to the party on the other side of the House and ask why there are no longer any programs to help seniors. That is the real question.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*Translation*]

VINCENT PLANTE

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on Friday, September 29, I had the honour of hosting a cocktail party at my riding office in Lévis for Vincent Plante and his family, to congratulate Mr. Plante on winning the Governor General's Caring Canadian Award.

Today, I would like to pay tribute to the unconditional dedication of a man who has worked for more than 30 years to improve the living conditions of the less fortunate in our society.

As an adolescent, Vincent Plante was already organizing activities to benefit his parish. Since then, with his wife, Nicole, his brothers, Gérard, Louis and Aurélien, and his sisters-in-law, whom I also salute, he has worked to improve the lives of others. He visits the elderly in several facilities and also serves communion at Hôtel-Dieu de Lévis hospital. He told me that he had sometimes spoken the final words of comfort to patients before their passing. With their enchanted Christmas tree, the Plante family brings joy and Christmas gifts to children—sometimes the only gift they receive.

Mr. Plante provides outstanding care without making distinctions or passing judgment. As we say where I come from, his heart is in the right place. This award also honours all the volunteers in Lévis—Bellechasse and Les Etchemins, and I want to say thank you to Mr. Plante, because he symbolizes our country's generosity.

* * *

[*English*]

TEACHERS

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize teachers in York South—Weston and across Canada on this World Teachers' Day.

I was fortunate enough to spend 12 years as a teacher and have the utmost respect for the dedication and commitment required of every educator at every level.

Through their daily work, Canadian teachers make a remarkable contribution to our national fabric by fostering our children's capacity and desire to learn.

On World Teachers' Day we are also reminded of the challenges facing teachers as they diligently work to impart pupils with a solid education while making our schools welcoming, encouraging and inclusive.

Today is an opportunity to celebrate these teachers and thank them for their work.

I ask the House to join me in saluting the effort and dedication of the men and women across this nation who make such a significant difference in the lives of our youth. The contributions of teachers are not only essential, but absolutely invaluable.

* * *

[*Translation*]

CANADIAN WOMEN'S CURLING CHAMPIONSHIP

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in a letter addressed to the General Manager of Curling Québec, dated July 31, 2006, Warren Hansen, Manager of Event Operations and Media at the Canadian Curling Association announced his decision not to hold the Canadian women's curling championship, the Scotties Tournament of Hearts, in Quebec City in 2008. The association cited linguistic issues, among others, for this decision.

Quebec City is host to many international events and the language laws have never interfered. Refusing to hold an event in Quebec City for reasons of language is simply incomprehensible.

The linguistic issue was resolved in Quebec a long time ago and nothing can justify Curling Canada's decision. The government should approach this agency to ensure that Quebec City is no longer discriminated against because of the French language.

* * *

[*English*]

WILD SALMON STOCKS

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, once again this week another independent report has come out raising the alarm about the harm that open net fish farms cause to wild salmon stocks.

The research that was published in one of the world's most prestigious journals shows that more than 95% of the wild salmon that swim past fish farms die as a result of sea lice infestations from those farms. According to Dr. Andy Dobson, an epidemiologist from Princeton University who specializes in wildlife diseases, "The work is of an impeccably high standard, and will be very difficult to refute".

Now, the debate on the subject has been settled for years, but the government is acting much like the old government in not taking the necessary action. It sounds like more of the same.

There is no need to talk to the skeptics. DFO which is in charge of this file is meant to protect our wild stocks and meant to protect the fish that swim in our waters. It is time for this out of touch department to stand up and do what is right and do what it needs to do. It is time for the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans to show some leadership on this file.

Statements by Members

●(1405)

BIOFUELS STRATEGY

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Mr. Speaker, these days everyone is talking about biofuels. Across the country there is a buzz about this developing industry. Standards are being set, policies put in place and plants are being built.

Provincial governments must move quickly if they wish to establish an industry in their jurisdiction.

One of the biggest surprises that I received after the election was to realize how little the previous government had done on this file. The new federal government has worked hard in a short time to put a comprehensive biofuels strategy in place. It will be released this fall and will address both ethanol and biodiesel.

We have worked hard to make sure that producer ownership is a part of the alternate fuels equation.

If we do not ensure that producers have the ability to fully participate in the biofuels sector, we will have failed them.

Cypress AgriEnergy Inc. has worked for years to advance the case for ethanol development in my area and it is at it again. It has gone together with Action Southwest to sponsor a forum on ethanol in Shaunavon, Saskatchewan scheduled for October 12. It brings together a wealth of information and I, along with 400 others, will be there to learn more about the industry.

Once again, southwest Saskatchewan leads the way.

* * *

SRI LANKA

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to urge the government to assist in working for a peaceful solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka and to condemn the brutal attacks that have led to such loss of life. This kind of violence cannot be tolerated by the international community.

My riding of York West has a significant population of Tamil Canadians and I have heard from many members of the community who are very upset by the recent actions of the Colombo government. We must provide whatever assistance is necessary to ensure stability in Sri Lanka and to work toward a sustainable peace and immediate end to the violence that has cost so many lives.

I call upon the government to work without delay to establish peace and security in Sri Lanka. The government must work to find a solution that fully respects the rights of the Tamil people and that will lead to a lasting peace.

* * *

CANADA-UKRAINE PARLIAMENTARY PROGRAM

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wish to recognize 20 youthful delegates from Ukraine who have visited with us for the past three weeks. They are here in members' offices to gain knowledge of the value and perspectives of Canada's most important democratic institution, the Parliament of Canada.

These young people, representing the Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Program, embody the highest ideals of achievement and

community service. They are the future leaders of Ukraine, young people like Olga Zhdanova from my office.

Canada and Ukraine are inextricably linked forever by prior migration. Fully one in 30 Canadians are of Ukrainian descent, as are my wife and daughters.

Ukraine holds a special place in the hearts of Canadians. Canada was the first country in the western world to accord diplomatic recognition in 1990 to an independent Ukraine.

As the young emissaries depart, we wish them well and say *mnohaya lita*, best wishes.

* * *

[Translation]

ALBERTA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Ms. Pauline Picard (Drummond, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in a recent ruling, the Chief Commissioner of the Alberta Human Rights Commission denied a verbal harassment complaint filed by a francophone Albertan, Gilles Caron, against the City of Edmonton, his former employer.

After being fired for using offensive language with a colleague, Mr. Caron also filed a verbal harassment complaint and the commissioner denied the complaint last June. In the commissioner's opinion, terms like "Frenchie" or "maple syrup" were not significant or offensive enough for a tribunal hearing.

It is unacceptable to be the target of repeated discriminatory remarks in the workplace, regardless of what provokes those remarks. Mr. Caron pointed out that the commissioner's comments in his decision show what little attention is given to discriminatory remarks toward francophones.

The Bloc Québécois sincerely hopes that the government does not endorse this decision.

* * *

[English]

CHAMPIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH AWARD

Mrs. Betty Hinton (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to rise in the House today and recognize an outstanding constituent who is also the winner of the 2006 Champions of Mental Health Award.

Denise Taylor is an accomplished Métis woman with a wealth of both personal and professional experience in the field of mental health. This impassioned woman has raised the profile of aboriginal people suffering from mental illness and delivered her message regarding the need to identify and embrace cultural identity as a tool to heal mental health afflictions. Denise has accomplished this through volunteerism, for which she won the 2003 Woman of Distinction Award from the YWCA, and her work as an aboriginal policy advisor for interior health.

Denise is also a noted speaker. She has presented at conferences and has addressed numerous groups from youth to elders in first nations and urban aboriginal communities.

I congratulate Denise on a well-deserved award. She truly is a champion of mental health.

* * *

● (1410)

PROPOSED PICKERING AIRPORT

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the communities of north Pickering have been besieged by Transport Canada since the 1970s. The bureaucrats have simply refused to give up their efforts to develop an unneeded white elephant airport in my riding. The only thing standing in their way is my constituents who have loudly said no.

The current government is standing back while the bureaucrats systematically depopulate north Pickering, erasing gains made by the previous government. As a landlord it deliberately allows homes to fall into disrepair so it can evict tenants, board up homes and then demolish them.

The Ontario Housing Tribunal has strongly condemned the atrociously negligent practices of Transport Canada and has ruled in favour of the evicted tenants. This government, however, has not accepted these rulings. It is dragging my constituents back to court in costly appeals.

I tell the government to call off its attack on our community, rein in the bureaucrats, properly manage these lands and say no to another Mirabel in north Pickering.

* * *

LIBERAL PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, apparently the Liberals are so ashamed of their party's debt that they are avoiding calls and not returning emails from Liberal International. This blatant attempt to avoid communication is shocking, given that the Liberal Party of Canada is a founding member.

Yesterday the secretary general of Liberal International, Jasper Veen, sent an email to the Liberal Party president reminding him of the \$25,000 owed. What is interesting to note is that although the largest political party in Liberal International is the Liberal Party of Canada, it is one of the smallest financial contributors, as compared to the member parties from sub-Saharan Africa.

It is shameful. The Liberals are piggy-backing off the poor nations of Africa, while continuing to rack up debt.

Perhaps this just shows how much the Liberals care about their values when they cannot even support an organization designed to do just that.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government has announced what it calls "fat trimming" from our foreign affairs capacities and our international development capabilities.

Statements by Members

To Canadians' dismay, the Prime Minister's idea of fat includes: foreign policy outreach and consultations with civil society and academic institutions; public diplomacy initiatives and cultural exchanges; diplomatic missions abroad; and unbelievably, youth international internships which prepare qualified staff with international exposure for future employment with Foreign Affairs and CIDA as well as countless Canadian NGOs and international agencies.

The government is suffering severe myopia. These cuts will reduce non-profit's ability to deliver valued programs, impact negatively on diplomatic and cultural relations around the globe and restrict the availability of Canadian personnel with essential international exposure.

Mr. Prime Minister, it is never too late to admit that one is wrong and reverse a bad decision.

* * *

OKTOBERFEST

Hon. Karen Redman (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this coming weekend Kitchener invites the world to share in the great German tradition of Oktoberfest. The nine day festival is the largest Bavarian celebration in North America and boasts Canada's greatest Thanksgiving Day parade.

The 38th annual Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest celebrates our local Canadian German heritage with over 20 Festhallen and 45 cultural and family events. Through the gaiety of this Spirit of Gemuetlichkeit, the local economy is stimulated and over 70 charities and not for profit organizations raise funds to benefit the residents.

Kitchener is firmly rooted in its German heritage. Oktoberfest is an opportunity to commemorate the traditions and culture of our nation's three million German Canadians.

I would also like to congratulate the hundreds of volunteers who commit their time and energy to the success of Oktoberfest.

Kitchener is the place to be for the next two weeks. I invite all Canadians to don their lederhosen and head to Oktoberfest.

* * *

[Translation]

SAVOURA GREENHOUSES

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to bring to the attention of the House a very important economic development project for the regional municipality of Maskinongé, a project I have worked hard on since being elected.

I am referring to the Savoura greenhouses in Saint-Étienne des Grès. This project is an example of sustainable development as it will utilize the biogas generated by a landfill site, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and create about 100 jobs in our region.

Oral Questions

I am asking the federal government to immediately pay its \$4 million contribution, which was already committed by Treasury Board in February 2005. The promoters, the municipality of Saint-Étienne des Grès, the regional municipality of Maskinongé and all the economic stakeholders await a favourable reply shortly. The federal government must announce a favourable decision on this project as soon as possible.

* * *

•(1415)

[English]

AMISH SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our deepest sympathies and prayers go out to the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. It is impossible to fathom how a person of such cowardice could line up little girls and shoot them in the head, all the more appalling given how gentle the Amish are. Their resilience and spirit of forgiveness stand in stark contrast to the grotesque brutality that has been inflicted upon them.

Tragically many of their little girls are still hospital. They do not have medical insurance because the Amish response to a tragedy is for all to get together and bind together as one. These medical costs will be in the millions and will overwhelm their resources.

I urge everyone who wishes to help to contact the Mennonite Central Committee website at www.mcc.org or call 1-888-622-6337. Heaven knows they need our help during their time of greatest need.

* * *

FEDERAL ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is day 106 of the Liberal Senate's foot-dragging and filibuster on the toughest anti-corruption law in Canadian history, the federal accountability act.

After the House of Commons passed the accountability act in 72 days, the Liberal Senate clearly is trying to delay this bill from coming into law. As a matter of fact, this week alone the Senate committee continued with its stalling tactics by holding only a few hours of hearings, in fact so few hearings that Liberal Senator Poulin has almost completed her full time law degree while still sitting in the Senate. It is unreal.

Canadians want to know who is secretly giving the Liberal Senate its marching orders. Is it one of the Liberal leadership candidates? Nobody knows.

If the Liberals wish to regain any credibility in the eyes of Canadians, they should stop delaying the accountability act and pass the toughest anti-corruption law in Canadian history now.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

JUSTICE

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada is a model for the world precisely because

Canadians cherish freedom of religion, freedom of speech and individual human rights and have a profound respect for the rights of minorities.

We are a country that knows freedom from fear. We are a country of social harmony that reflects our deepest shared values as Canadians, but now the Prime Minister is planning legislation that puts our Charter of Rights and Freedoms under assault. Why is the government contemplating yet another attack on individual rights for some misguided political gain? Why is he playing so carelessly with the genius that is our wonderful country?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have no idea what the Leader of the Opposition is referring to. This government does not have and would not have plans to introduce legislation that contravenes the charter of rights. This government stands for and with the protection of minority rights in all cases.

I wish the Liberal Party would stop fearmongering and start focusing on issues that are of concern to Canadians rather than baseless speculation.

This government will always stand to protect basic rights.

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, under this new government, values like equity and fairness are falling faster than the autumn leaves in our country.

Gay and lesbian Canadians are fearful of their future. That is new. Quebeckers are told by a government adviser that their moral standards are corrupting the rest of Canada. That is new. Our charter is undermined and the program that helped visible minorities fight for their legal rights is history. That is new to all of us.

As for women, would the Prime Minister explain to the House why his new government has dropped equality of women from the mandate of Status of Women Canada?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Again, Mr. Speaker, this is all just ridiculous hyperbole from the Leader of the Opposition.

What we have with respect to the program at the Status of Women is an extremely effective minister in the Minister of Canadian Heritage, whom we are proud of for her great work.

She has, among other things, added to the mandate of the Status of Women program, supporting the full participation of women in Canada's economic, social and cultural life. I want to know why the Liberals oppose that inclusion in the mandate of the Status of Women program.

*Oral Questions***NATIONAL DEFENCE**

• (1420)

[Translation]

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is no opposition coming from us; this was already in place under our government.

What the Prime Minister's actions are telling us is that equality and justice do not matter much to this so-called new government. Discrimination against gays and lesbians, elimination of the objective of equality for women. This so-called new government is attacking the Charter, ignoring the courts and abolishing the program that helps minorities fight for their rights.

Has this Prime Minister's flat out decided to abandon the gays and lesbians, women, francophones outside Quebec and every visible minority, or is he, on top of everything else, giving up on the whole idea of what our wonderful Canada is all about?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think that, in the last election, Canadians have made it very clear that they have had enough of the Liberal Party, which thinks that it has a monopoly on Canadian virtues and values.

Like all Canadians, we in the Conservative Party share our Canadian values. We will always defend our Canadian values.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister can try to keep his agenda hidden, but the Minister of Justice and other members of his caucus have betrayed him and shown their true colours. After it loses the vote on same-sex marriage, the government plans to table a radical bill legalizing discrimination against the gay and lesbian community.

How dare the Prime Minister impose his right-wing values on Canadians?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that the hon. member opposite do a little research. The only government in Canada that ever adopted such legislation was Ontario's Liberal government.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during the last election campaign, the Prime Minister managed to muzzle his candidates. Now that his minority government is moving from talk to action, we finally get to see the hidden side of his right-wing agenda: promoting intolerance, curtailing minority rights, and refusing to fight for women's equality.

Why did the Prime Minister lie to Canadians during the last election campaign? Why does he want to do away with Canadians' rights?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberals are always talking about Canadians' rights and Canadian values.

I would like to know where the Liberals were when Canadians of Chinese origin were demanding the government apologize for the unjust head tax imposed on the Chinese. For thirteen years, the Liberals refused to face Canadians of Chinese origin, but we acted on this issue because our government respects the rights of Canadians.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, while the government is making its cuts, at the expense of the most disadvantaged members of society, it is letting hundreds of millions of dollars go to the Americans under a botched airplane purchase contract. The government's haste in embarking on talks with the American company Boeing, without even making sure that this sale met the American government's security requirements, might result in additional costs of several hundred million dollars.

How does the Prime Minister explain this shameless waste of public funds?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the leader of the Bloc Québécois for his question. Unfortunately, he is mistaken, because the government will act effectively and speedily in purchasing equipment for our soldiers, for our military, including planes.

Until we have come to an agreement that is acceptable in terms of industrial and regional economic benefits, we will not be signing any contract for the purchases of military equipment that are planned.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, can the Prime Minister deny that acting speedily, as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister has said, and failing to check all of the details and the American laws properly, could end up costing us \$800 million, when he is cutting \$1 billion at the expense of the most disadvantaged people? While that may be acting speedily, it is above all acting irresponsibly.

Can he deny this information?

• (1425)

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Yes, I can deny it, and I do deny it.

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, on June 6, the Prime Minister and the Minister of National Defence promised us, virtually with hand on heart, that when a decision was finalized by the government for the purchase of planes and helicopters for the armed forces there would in fact be economic benefits and a boost for industry in Canada.

How can the Prime Minister and the Minister of National Defence, today, justify the deadlock we find ourselves in, because of the contract negotiated with Boeing, other than by the fact that they have been had like amateurs?

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am unaware of the member's allegation that there is an impasse. There is no impasse whatsoever. Negotiations are ongoing right now with Boeing. We expect that Boeing will provide the full requirement of benefits, and all the military purchases of the future will benefit Canadians, not only the military.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is not complicated, if we do not comply with the Americans' security requirements, there will be no economic benefits.

Oral Questions

And because there will be no economic benefits and there is no longer any guarantee of those benefits, and it will cost hundreds of millions of dollars more as a dead loss, why does the government not immediately stop what it is doing and go back to a bidding process that is transparent and fair and, most importantly, that will benefit the people who are paying, the taxpayers?

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I reject the premise of the member's question. We are going in a transparent process. There will be benefits to Canadians, to Canadian industry and to the military. This is the equipment that the armed forces needs.

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NATIONAL SECURITY

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today there were disturbing new revelations that show the extent to which the FBI investigates Canadian citizens right here in Canada, largely without the knowledge or permission of Canada's government. The FBI operates its largest foreign operation in Canada. Under the previous Liberal government, the FBI opened two field offices.

Does the Conservative government believe it is okay to let a foreign agency come across our border, onto our soil, and investigate our citizens without our permission? Is the government sanctioning that?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our security forces have agreements with our allies and with other nations in terms of information sharing. I can assure the House that these teams work together back and forth. I can also assure all Canadians that anything done on Canadian soil related to information sharing is done according to and within the guidelines of our laws.

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, according to the FBI's own information, due to the high volume of investigations it was conducting on Canadians, it gave clearance to its Buffalo office for routine investigations up to 50 miles within Canadian territory. That is all the way up into Toronto. An astonishing one-third of those agents came across the border without Canada's permission and not according to any agreements. They did it illegally.

What is the government going to do about it?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have indicated, our teams of officers from various security agencies work with our allies and sometimes it is with the U. S. We have teams that are designated to go back and forth across the border. Sometimes it is farther than 50 miles or 50 kilometres, whatever the distance the member just mentioned from the, apparently, high quality information that he is receiving from the upper echelons of the FBI.

I can assure the House that everything that is done on Canadian soil relating to security and safety investigations is done in accordance with our laws.

JUSTICE

Hon. Belinda Stronach (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative minority government does not have a mandate to reduce the freedoms that are already guaranteed to Canadians under the Charter of Rights and that have been confirmed by the courts. Despite the lack of a mandate for this, the justice minister continues to cater to his socially conservative base and threatens to eliminate equal marriage.

When will the Minister of Justice, not the parliamentary secretary, assure the House that he will not introduce legislation that in any way legalizes discrimination?

• (1430)

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the House that I will not introduce any legislation that legalizes discrimination.

Hon. Belinda Stronach (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has made it clear that he wants to reopen the debate about equal marriage, a debate that we have already had in this House. More recently, the justice minister has indicated that he already has a fallback plan for when this attempt fails.

When will the Prime Minister stop playing politics with Canadians' equal rights, stop catering to his socially conservative base and start governing for the majority of Canadians?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during the election, the Prime Minister and this government indicated that there would be a free vote on that issue and there would be a motion on that issue. That motion will be brought forward. Beyond that, anything else is speculation.

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STATUS OF WOMEN

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minority Conservative government is anti-women. It has cut off at the knees all organizations working for women's equality in Canada. The criteria has been changed so that no organization fighting for women's equality will receive funding. The Conservatives have put tape over women's mouths to shut them up. This is not democracy.

When will the minister stop attacking women and give them back their voice?

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, unlike the previous Liberal government that only talked about women's equality and did nothing for a decade, unlike the previous government that received multiple reports and recommendations and did nothing, and unlike the previous government that in fact cut funding for women's programs three times over the last decade, this new Conservative government will make a real difference in the lives of Canadian women.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that minister believes women should be satisfied with the status quo and to shut up about equality.

Oral Questions

Last week the government cut the budget of Status of Women by almost 40%. This week it voted against the Liberal motion supporting women's equality. This morning the minister failed to explain why equality was removed from the eligibility requirements of the women's program.

Will the minister not admit that she has failed Canadian women and that she does not believe in them at all? It is absolutely shameful what she is doing.

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to know what the hon. member opposite has against dealing with trafficking of women and victims of trafficking of women. I would like to know what the members opposite have against improving the CPP. I would like to know what the party opposite has against more affordable housing. I also would like to know what they have against acting on aboriginal matrimonial property rights.

This party does not hold boys' weekends to decide policy.

* * *

[*Translation*]

SPORT

Mr. Luc Malo (Verchères—Les Patriotes, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the City of Quebec will not host the most important curling competition for women in 2008 because, according to the Canadian Curling Association, Quebec's language law could have an impact on the event. Just imagine! According to Curling Canada, the stones do not glide as well in French. This is ridiculous.

What does the minister responsible for Sport Canada intend to do to remind Curling Canada that the game is played in many languages around the world and that Quebecers are very insulted by its attitude?

Hon. Michael Chong (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister for Sport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada is committed to promoting both official languages in the Canadian sport structure.

Sport Canada requires national sport organizations, including the Canadian Curling Association, to recognize the equality of French and English in our country.

Thanks to this long-standing commitment by the government and its partners, athletes have access to all the services that they need in both official languages.

•(1435)

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, faced with Curling Canada's attitude, the Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages, who is responsible for the Quebec region, could not come up with anything better than to invite that organization to visit Quebec City. We expect much more concrete measures on the part of the minister.

What is she waiting for to take concrete action towards Curling Canada by strongly condemning its narrow and biased vision, not only towards Quebec City, but the whole province? What is she waiting for to condemn Curling Canada for the contempt displayed towards Quebec City?

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I did not invite the Canadian Curling Association to visit Quebec City. The hon. member is mistaken and she is making statements that are totally false.

What I said is that it was up to the Canadian Curling Association to make the decision, but that the International Ice Hockey Federation does not find Bill 101 to be a constraint. In Quebec, we have Bill 101 and we respect it.

* * *

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday morning we were faced with another one of this government's ideological decisions.

The Minister of Canadian Heritage informed the representatives of women's groups that her department will no longer finance advocacy activities. But advocacy is something tangible.

How can the minister justify such a decision? It may be that she approves of her government's ideological approach aimed at slowing down progress toward equality for women by cutting their funding off.

[*English*]

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as this House has been told, we try to get value for Canadian taxpayer dollars. We believe that rather than lobbying and advocacy, we know what the problems are. We believe that groups that help women in their communities and in their daily lives will result in positive changes for women.

* * *

[*Translation*]

JUSTICE

Mr. Réal Ménard (Hochelaga, BQ): Mr. Speaker, with respect to the government's intention to legalize discrimination against homosexuals, the Prime Minister has maintained that this was pure speculation. However, as recently as Tuesday, his Minister of Justice openly stated his intention to introduce legislation to that effect.

Yesterday, the hon. member for Wild Rose confirmed to the media that the minister had indeed taken steps in that direction, adding that it was appropriate to do so.

How can the Prime Minister explain that members of his caucus and his cabinet contradict him on this issue and show enthusiasm for such a plan? That is shameful.

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to see where, in fact, I confirmed that any such legislation was coming forward. That is speculation on the part of the member and anyone else making that statement.

*Oral Questions***CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION**

Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Joe Taylor, the son of a second world war Canadian soldier, was born in England in 1945. He and his mother became Canadian citizens when they landed in Halifax in 1946. When the marriage failed, he and his mother returned to England.

When Mr. Taylor moved back to Canada several years ago, he was denied citizenship rights because he was born out of wedlock.

Does the minister really believe it is justifiable in this day and age to discriminate against children born out of wedlock?

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have to say that I am very sympathetic, like all parliamentarians, to people who find themselves in situations that the act did not anticipate and we want to sort those out.

However, when there is a situation where there is a court decision that has implications for hundreds of statutes, dozens of departments and could cost tens of billions of dollars, we have a duty to appeal.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.): Rubbish, Mr. Speaker.

On September 1, Federal Court Justice Martineau ruled sections of the Citizenship Act unconstitutional and ordered the minister to restore Mr. Taylor's citizenship. The minister is appealing the decision.

Defending one's charter rights is an expensive process. Mr. Taylor does not have the financial resources to fight the government. Has the government eliminated the court challenges program to deny people like Mr. Taylor their charter rights?

We, as Liberals, had a court challenges program.

•(1440)

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as Liberals, they had 13 years to sort out the problem and they did absolutely nothing. That is a fact.

As I explained to the member, we are trying to find ways to deal with this situation. Last year, in the last Parliament as an opposition party, we paved the way for war brides to become Canadian citizens.

We are working to that end but we cannot stand idle when court decisions threaten dozens of statutes and could cost the government billions of dollars. In a case like that, it is our duty to stand up for the Government of Canada and the people of Canada.

* * *

[Translation]

PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Public Works blundered badly. He was in such a hurry to have his new military toys that, when purchasing the C-17s and the Chinook helicopters, for the modest sum of \$9 billion, he used the wrong procurement process. By purchasing country to country, instead of commercially, he managed to hand over nearly \$1 billion in commission to his Republican friends in Washington.

Will the Minister of Public Works acknowledge his responsibility in this matter, or is he too busy trying to get himself elected in Repentigny?

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know where the member opposite gets his outrageous numbers. In fact, the number exceeds the total value of all the contracts we have even talked about.

This is a ridiculous allegation. We are getting the aircraft and we will be getting the ships and the trucks that the military needs. Citizens of Canada will benefit by this. There will be industrial benefits and we will get it at the world price.

[Translation]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this government must answer for its actions.

What other useful programs must this government cut in order to clean up the mess created by the Minister of Public Works? Furthermore, why is the Minister of Public Works not in this House to tell us about his management practices?

Will the Prime Minister finally call a by-election in Repentigny? Will the Prime Minister finally order Senator Fortier to get himself elected as soon as possible, so that he can come here and account for his poor management of public money?

[English]

Mr. James Moore (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in file after file, what we are doing for Canadian taxpayers is what we promised to do in the election campaign. We are getting value for Canadian taxpayer dollars. That is what Canadians sent us here to do. That is what we will do for Canadian taxpayers, we will get value.

When the next election campaign comes, Canadians will reward a government that keeps its word and gets value. It will not matter who is leading that party, if it is Bob recession Rae or the honourable academic from Massachusetts.

* * *

AFGHANISTAN

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, two weeks ago Canada had the honour of welcoming the president of Afghanistan. He requested Canada's assistance in helping to eradicate polio from Afghanistan.

Could the Minister of International Cooperation please tell us if there are any new initiatives as a result of her discussions with President Karzai?

Oral Questions

[*Translation*]

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his excellent question.

In fact, I announced just today our contribution of \$5 million to a project aimed at immunizing 7 million young Afghan children against polio.

Specifically, these funds will be allocated to the World Health Organization and UNICEF for the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. That program will target the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand in particular. This is our response to President Karzai's appeal during his visit.

[*English*]

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today former commander Colonel Mike Capstick cites some of the major problems with the mission in Afghanistan. He cites the blunder of the wrong number of soldiers being sent, warlords and drug criminals in the Afghan government and, most interesting, humanitarian aid that never arrives.

If the government could admit it only spends \$1 on aid for every \$9 on combat, why can it not admit that aid is not getting through because this is the wrong mission? It is an unbalanced mission.

• (1445)

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a number of times in the House the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and I have confirmed the value of our mission in Afghanistan. We are in Afghanistan because the government of Afghanistan asked us to be there. If we are not there and NATO is not there, the Taliban will return and there will be a murderous regime in Afghanistan. I do not think the NDP wants that in Afghanistan.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister has a reputation for strong and blunt answers. I wish, just once, he would get up in the House and not give all the empty rhetoric.

Now that the U.S. Republicans, no less than the Senate majority leader Bill Frist, are asking for peace talks in Afghanistan, is the minister finally ready to listen? Will the government step up to the plate and help kick-start peace talks in Afghanistan?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are in Afghanistan as part of NATO. We have certain responsibilities within Afghanistan, particularly the Kandahar province. It is not our function to become the government of Afghanistan. We do not negotiate on the part of Afghanistan. It is up to the government to make any arrangements.

* * *

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development will not answer about the patronage contract for Conservative crony Harvie Andre. Instead, he insults the previous negotiator and steamrolls the truth.

The former premier of Ontario refutes the amounts the minister claims. He also confirms the so-called work Mr. Andre was hired to do is already completed. Mr. Peterson said today, "All it needs is for the political masters to sign on. My work is all done".

Why did the minister give Harvie Andre a lucrative contract to do nothing?

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Dr. Andre is a very well known Canadian with considerable experience. He is also a former parliamentarian. Above that, he is working on behalf of the Government of Canada for only \$50,000. This is dramatically less than what was paid to the previous negotiator, who unfortunately did not accomplish his task. This amounts to 100% of the value at 5% of the cost.

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, he is a well known Conservative who is paid to do no work.

In the days of Mulroney, Harvie Andre used to say that one made more money by knowing Harvie Andre than by being Harvie Andre. The minister is sure trying to turn that around. I guess he feels he owes him one. It was Harvie Andre who got the minister a job with the Indian Claims Commission in 1992.

The minister needs to stop ducking and weaving and produce this contract. Let us see it. Let the facts show that he gave a man who owed him big, his campaign co-chair and riding president's father-in-law, a man who got him a job in 1992, a lucrative contact to do absolutely nothing.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Mr. Andre is a very well known Canadian with a wealth of experience. In fact, he is working until the end of this year for \$50,000. I know this might be hard for members opposite to believe, as it does seem like a very conservative amount, but it is the truth. Again, this is something of which we are very proud.

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in January the government inherited the best set of books ever, but it has still decided to cut important programs. Many of those cuts affect the most vulnerable in Canada.

With a \$13 billion surplus, could the minister explain why the government feels the need to pick on our aboriginal communities by refusing to honour the signed Kelowna accord and by freezing funding for capital, operations and band elections for Ontario first nations?

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada does support band elections.

Oral Questions

This amount is something that previously was under a different budget umbrella. Now it is being folded into the entire budget for the Ontario region. This move is seen by the community as important.

• (1450)

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that is not very satisfactory. It seems that the meanspirited minority Conservative government wants to make Ontario's first nations pay for the tragic difficulties in the northern Ontario community of Kashechewan.

Will the government do the right thing and solve the Kashechewan problem out of the big financial surplus it inherited and not on the backs of Ontario first nations, which badly need funding for capital, operations and band elections?

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, clearly, the people of Kashechewan have faced considerable hardship. After we came into government, we took immediate action. Since the spring, there has been considerable progress. As of August, all the residents have returned to Kashechewan, and the water now meets the Ontario provincial standards.

It should be said that the previous Liberal government left the people of Kashechewan without a dime or a plan.

* * *

[Translation]

LABOUR

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, union representatives from the Outaouais who support the anti-scab bill introduced by the Bloc Québécois have been trying for several days to meet with the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. He refuses to meet with them.

Why is the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, who is also the member for the Outaouais, refusing to meet with these workers? Why does he refuse to even listen to the sensible arguments that these workers would like to make in support of this bill?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, everyone knows that in Canada only two provinces out of 10 have introduced anti-scab legislation: Quebec, in 1977, and British Columbia, in 1993.

Given that this is a shared responsibility, why do the Bloc Québécois opposition members want to force the other provinces to adopt legislation they do not want?

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, who is from Quebec, should know that since there are no anti-scab provisions in the Canada Labour Code, conflicts governed by that code last almost twice as long as those governed by the Quebec labour code.

Will the Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec listen to

reason, abandon his ideological approach and remember that he is from Quebec and that he already voted for a similar bill as a member? Will he look after the workers rather than his limousine?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have statistics that contradict the member's claims. In provinces where there is anti-scab legislation, conflicts even last longer.

I want to point out that we had a vote in this House on the law. It was reviewed in 1999 and, by consensus, the members decided that the best balance could be achieved by establishing a law whereby the use of replacement workers would not serve to undermine the representation of unions, which is reflected in the law.

* * *

[English]

PORTS AND HARBOURS

Mr. Paul Zed (Saint John, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, again I rise about the Saint John harbour cleanup. Yesterday I was pleased to join Premier Shawn Graham when he signed an agreement for this project in Saint John for \$26.6 million.

The Liberal premier was able to do in one day what the Prime Minister has been unwilling to do in nine months. If the Liberal Premier of New Brunswick can commit to Saint John harbour cleanup on his first day as premier, how long will it take the Prime Minister to live up to his commitment and to fund this crucial project for our community?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am happy that my hon. colleague has stood up for this issue. It is the first time he has done that.

This government made a joint \$8.5 million commitment as the first step to clean up the Saint John harbour, and that was done under a Conservative provincial government.

* * *

• (1455)

PAYDAY LOAN INDUSTRY

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for years many provinces called upon the federal government to suspend the application of the Criminal Code section on interest rates for payday loans. This would allow them to regulate the industry and better protect consumers throughout Canada.

Could the justice minister please let us know when he plans to address this very important issue?

*Oral Questions***CANADIAN HERITAGE**

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's new government, in contrast to the previous Liberal government, is working cooperatively with our provincial partners. That is why tomorrow we will introduce a bill on payday loans, which will address the concerns from provinces that wish to regulate the industry to better protect consumers.

I look forward to support from all parties in the House on this important bill, so we can work together with the provinces.

* * *

CANADIAN WHEAT BOARD

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government has clearly stated its intention to cut out the Wheat Board's legs from under it. It has appointed a minister who opposes the mandate of the Wheat Board and has done everything in his power to systematically destroy this Canadian institution, with sham round tables, closed door meetings and whisper campaigns.

I have a simple question for the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board. Will he allow, as the law states, the 85,000 farmers who use the Wheat Board a vote on its future, yes or no?

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what we have done is taken steps to follow through on our campaign promise. Campaign promises are something the Liberals are not used to. We said we were moving to marketing choice. We said we would appoint a task force to give us some of the details on the marketing choice.

However, I always find it a little passing strange when my critic from the NDP or my critic from the Liberals, who do not have to live under the Wheat Board, tell the rest of Canada how they have to market their products.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that reminds us of the shameful softwood lumber agreement. I asked a very simple question. Does he intend to allow the 85,000 farmers who use the Wheat Board a democratic vote?

There should be no more talk about choice. The only choice is whether the government will follow the law or break the law, extend the rights of farmers or deny them, support democracy or suffocate it. Which is it? Will farmers get a say, yes or no?

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, so far we have appointed a task force. That task force is to report to me in about three or four weeks. It is going to give some of the details about what a corporate structure of a voluntary wheat board might look like.

We are determined to have a strong, voluntary wheat board and a marketing choice. That is all we have done. There have been no other proposals on the table. There has been discussion. Right now there is nothing to even have a plebiscite about.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the proposed Canadian museum for human rights will be a national landmark for the city of Winnipeg, a global meeting place for learning, reflection, dialogue and debate on the issue of human rights.

The government has had the file for months now, yet the supporters of the museum have heard nothing on whether they will receive sustainable funding.

Will the Prime Minister guarantee that the Canadian museum for human rights will receive its requested operating funds or, once again, is human rights not a priority for the government?

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government understands the difference between a building and human rights.

We have been working very diligently with the Asper family. We understand that the plans are in place. We are reviewing those plans. We have discussed viable options for consideration by the Asper family. In fact, I will be meeting with representatives of that group later this week.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this past Tuesday North Korea announced its intention to conduct a nuclear test in the future. This announcement has provoked a strong reaction by the international community as it is a threat to regional peace and stability.

What is Canada doing to respond to this threat?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, North Korea, as we know, has made recent statements and engaged in an attempt to conduct a nuclear test in the future. It is seen as very provocative. It undermines regional peace and stability. It is unacceptable to Canada, as it is to the entire international community.

Canada has repeatedly urged North Korea to dismantle its nuclear weapons program and refrain from proliferation, or risk further international isolation and condemnation.

The government remains in close contact with our allies on this issue. We will raise our objections with North Korea every opportunity we get and we will, again, strongly urge North Korea to return to the six party talks.

Speaker's Ruling

● (1500)

LITERACY

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Treasury Board president was deafening by his silence.

We have demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt, both on the written record and on tape, that this minister has dismissed funding to address adult literacy as wasteful and not something the Government of Canada should help with after the fact.

The Treasury Board president denied those remarks, but the hard evidence clearly proves otherwise.

Will he simply confess that he misspoke himself and reinstate \$18 million for those Canadians who need that help with their literacy skills?

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with respect to the first point of the comment made by the member for Wascana, I think it is a gross distortion of my comment. What the member opposite alleges that I said that appears in today's *Globe and Mail* and appeared in *Hansard* on Friday, in fact I never did say and *Hansard* will back that up.

If he has a tape, I would certainly welcome him tabling it in this House. If the member has a copy of the tape, he should table it. I have the quotes from the *Globe and Mail* that he just described. He should table that and we look forward to seeing it.

* * *

[Translation]

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday in committee, to our astonishment, witnesses from the Treasury Board Secretariat stated that a minister who wants to can obtain the identity of a person who submits an access to information request. Last week's budget cuts showed us that this government is ruthless toward those who oppose its authority. In addition to a list of reporters, now the government wants to have a list of everyone who makes an access to information request.

We are wondering how far this will go and when it will stop.

[English]

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me be very clear. When recent allegations surfaced in the media, I immediately contacted the Privacy Commissioner. I also sent, and my deputy sent, to the public service the following note:

—it is important that all employees, including Ministers and their exempt staff, are reminded of the rules and regulations surrounding the Access to Information and Privacy Acts.

The President of the Treasury has asked...that the name of an individual who has made a request under the Access to Information Act or the Privacy Act is considered personal information and can only be disclosed in conformity with the Privacy Act.

* * *

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of Mr. Ferguson Jenkins, Ambassador of the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame and a pioneering legend of Canadian sport.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

* * *

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on the eve of the break for Thanksgiving, I wonder if the House leader for the government could indicate the agenda he will be pursuing for the balance of today and tomorrow, as well as the first week after we are back from the Thanksgiving break.

I also wonder, because obviously the high interest in the House and the very high degree of interest in the country, if the House leader could give us some indication of when the government will bring forward its various proposals with respect to same sex marriage.

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today we will continue to debate an opposition motion.

Tomorrow, we will complete debate on the amendment to Bill C-24, the softwood lumber agreement. Under a special order adopted Tuesday, there is an opportunity to sit into the weekend if needed to give members, particularly members of the New Democratic Party, the debating time they requested on such an important bill.

Next week, the House will be adjourned to allow members to return to their ridings.

When the House resumes on October 16, we will debate Bill C-23, the Criminal Code; Bill S-2, hazardous materials; and Bill C-6, aeronautics.

On Tuesday I will call Bill C-24 again. Thursday will be an allotted day.

We will introduce the motion that the hon. member requested in due course.

[Translation]

At the same time, I would like to wish everyone a happy Thanksgiving weekend.

* * *

● (1505)

[English]

PRIVILEGE

COMMENTS MADE BY PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY TO THE PRIME MINISTER—SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I am now prepared to rule on the question of privilege raised by the hon. Leader of the Opposition concerning comments made by the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister during question period on Thursday, September 28, 2006.

[Translation]

I would like to thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition for raising this matter as well as the hon. parliamentary secretary for his intervention.

[English]

During question period on September 28, the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine posed a question concerning the government's response to the O'Connor report on the imprisonment and torture of Mr. Arar.

In the preamble to the question, the hon. member noted that the previous Liberal government had initiated the O'Connor inquiry. She went on to ask the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister why the government did not extend an apology to Mr. Arar.

In his response to the question, the hon. parliamentary secretary claimed:

Mr. Speaker, how ironic that a representative of the Liberal Party should say they took the first step with respect to Mr. Arar. They did by taking actions which ended up putting him in a Syrian jail.

Following question period, the hon. Leader of the Opposition rose on a question of privilege to take issue with these comments. He expressed concern that the remarks suggested that the Liberal government had been involved in the events surrounding the imprisonment of Mr. Arar and he requested that the hon. member withdraw the remarks.

The hon. parliamentary secretary defended his response to the question by quoting from Mr. Justice O'Connor's report. In conclusion, he asserted that this matter was not a question of privilege but rather a point of debate.

I undertook to look at both members' statements and return to the House with a ruling on the matter.

As I have stated before in previous rulings, it is rare for the Chair to find a prima facie case of privilege when there appears to be a dispute as to facts. In order for there to be a prima facie case of privilege, I must find that the hon. parliamentary secretary's comments impeded the hon. Leader of the Opposition in the performance of his parliamentary duties.

I have examined the arguments offered by both the Leader of the Opposition and the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, as well as questions put by the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine and answers provided by the hon. parliamentary secretary in question period.

Given the differing views of both hon. members, it is difficult for the Chair to regard the matter as anything other than debate. I am, therefore, unable to find a basis for the charge of prima facie breach of privilege.

[Translation]

Despite this conclusion, the raising of this matter in circumstances of high emotion on both sides affords the Chair an opportunity to address broader issues of decorum.

As I noted in a ruling given on October 1, 2003 and which can be found on pages 8040 and 8041 of the *House of Commons Debates*:

As members of Parliament, we all deal regularly with differing interpretations of various events or situations and differing views of documents laid before the House. Members can—and often do—disagree about the actual facts of the same situation. Disagreements of this kind form the basis of our debates. Our rules are designed to permit—indeed to encourage—members to present differing views on a given issue. This tolerance of different points of view is an essential feature of the freedom of

Points of Order

speech and the decision-making process that lie at the heart of our parliamentary system.

[English]

But the exercise of that freedom of speech ought to be based on the underlying principle of respect to the House and to other members. Conduct should not cause a disruption to proceedings.

It would be an understatement to say that we have been plagued in recent weeks by what any observer would have to admit is an unusually noisy chamber, particularly during question period. Some of the disorder is being triggered by questionable language or provocative statements.

But much of it also appears to be generated by interruptions, interjections or other demonstrations, including applause and standing ovations, actions that seem to be designed to drown out or plainly disrupt those asking questions or those answering them. But when the noise reaches levels where no one, not even the Speaker, can hear what is being said, the House as a whole loses some credibility.

So I appeal to all hon. members for cooperation. I will continue to try to give members wide latitude in expressing their points of view, but I ask for all members' assistance in ensuring that we can all hear the member who has been recognized and who has the floor.

I was tempted to give this ruling at 2:15, but I thank hon. members for being patient and listening to it now.

* * *

● (1510)

[Translation]

POINTS OF ORDER

DECORUM

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Marleau and Montpetit, chapter 13, defines what order and decorum means. I am quoting from page 503, which states:

One of the basic principles of parliamentary procedure is that proceedings in the House of Commons are conducted in terms of a free and civil discourse. In order that debate on matters of public policy be held in a civil manner, the House has adopted rules of order and decorum for the conduct of Members towards each other and towards the institution as a whole. Members are to show respect for one another and for different viewpoints; offensive or rude behaviour or language is not tolerated. Emotions are to be expressed in words rather than acted out; opinions are to be expressed with civility and freely, without fear of punishment or reprisal.

While the leader of the official opposition was putting his first question, we on this side clearly saw the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Immigration display inappropriate behaviour, literally putting their fingers in their mouths and pretending to be throwing up. I am weighing my words carefully.

Mr. Speaker, that kind of gesture cannot be tolerated in this place and we think that it is up to you to ensure that decorum is maintained in the House.

Business of Supply

In closing, I would ask that the two ministers involved offer explanations and apologies, if they are indeed worthy of their ministerial duties. One might also wonder if the people of Medicine Hat and Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon are proud of such totally unacceptable behaviour on the part of their respective representatives.

I ask that both ministers apologize for making these inappropriate gestures.

[*English*]

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the concern of my friend from across the way. Clearly, there are times in this place when sometimes perhaps, and I admit, I get a little bit carried away, and sometimes I find some of the comments coming from the opposition a little bit hard to take.

I will be very mindful of the reprimand that I have just received from my friend across the way.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Mr. Speaker, perhaps my level of English is not good enough, but I am always listening. I would like to know if the minister is apologizing for what he did. He gave us a justification of his behaviour, but my question is very clear: does the minister apologize for this inappropriate and disgraceful behaviour, which is a violation of the decorum in this House? That is my question.

The Speaker: This is truly a question, and oral question period is now over.

A point of order is a different matter.

The hon. minister provided a reply. I will review it, along with the question raised by the hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord regarding the call to order. If necessary, I will get back to the House with a ruling on this issue.

I did not see any of what the hon. member described, but if a problem persists, the Chair will certainly make a ruling.

I will now hear the hon. member for Saint John, also on a point of order.

• (1515)

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Zed (Saint John, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during question period, the hon. Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, in his reply to my question, which I have posed in this House on at least three other occasions, said that it was the first time I had raised this particular question regarding harbour cleanup. I would not want viewers to think that I am not interested in this file, nor would I want the record in any way to reflect that.

I think all members of this House of Commons, regardless of party, are interested in this file. I know that the minister, in the heat of the exchange, would want to make sure that the record was accurate. I can think of three times where I might have already raised the subject of harbour cleanup and the failure of the government to come through with this commitment.

That is my point of order. I wanted this reflected on the record.

The Speaker: The hon. member has clarified the facts in a way that I am sure is satisfactory to all concerned.

The hon. member for Wascana has a point of order.

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during the course of this question period and others this week, there has been a controversy about certain remarks made by the President of the Treasury Board, which he persists in denying that he made. I have pointed out on occasion that there is both a written record and a verbal record on tape of those remarks. I was invited during question period to table that material.

With respect to the written record, I would simply refer to government news release number 2006-047, dated September 25, 2006, which uses the words “wasteful”, “trimming fat” and not “good value”, all in relation to the programs that we have referred to with respect to literacy. So, in the government's own official record with its news releases, the information is very clear.

Further, when the President of the Treasury Board was out canvassing for loonies on the street corner earlier this week, his remarks were in fact recorded. I have them with me. I am certainly prepared to table that recording of what he said, which perfectly verifies what has been alleged here in question period.

I would simply make two requests. First of all, I would like to get the tape recorder back when the Table is done with it, and secondly, in the spirit of fair play, I hope the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister would table his BlackBerry, from which he quotes repeatedly in this House.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member for Wascana have the unanimous consent of the House to table the tape recorder?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: I am sure it will be played somewhere else, transcribed and copies sent to whomever wants them.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*English*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—OLDER WORKERS INCOME SUPPORT

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as we are about to go into the weekend, I would like to take this opportunity to wish all colleagues in this House a happy Thanksgiving and a very good week in their constituencies. I know that all of us have a lot to do back home. Sometimes people talk about the time we are not in the House as if it is time off, but all of us know that when we are not here there are plenty of things to do and a lot of people back in our ridings who are anxious to speak to us. That is a very important part of our work.

Business of Supply

I am pleased to rise today and speak to this opposition day motion from the Bloc Québécois in relation to programs for older workers. The Liberal Party certainly does support programs for older workers. We support the development of a pan-Canadian national older workers strategy. We think that strategy should incorporate a number of things, including, for instance, skills upgrading as well as flexible work environments, which are obviously important for older workers.

That strategy should also include community level partnerships, because if we want things to develop and work, whether they are programs for older workers in terms of retraining or trying to get them other employment, or whether they are related to economic development in nature, it is very important that they spring from the community. Those are the ones that work best in my experience. Having community level partnerships is an integral part of any successful program of that type.

We need also to recognize that older workers depend financially and psychologically on being able to continue working. In fact, psychologists tell us that all of us have a need to work. The need to feel productive and useful throughout our lives is an important part of our being, which works sometimes at home or in another kind of workplace. We have a variety of ways in which to fulfill that need, but it is a need we all need to fulfill. Therefore, these kinds of programs should include not only income support but also retraining and skills upgrading, which are of course very important.

It seems to me that on these issues all we have heard from the minority Conservative government so far is some lip service, but very little else. It seems to me that its actions so far have shown a lack of commitment to a national older worker strategy. For instance, we saw in May the end of the older worker pilot project initiative brought forward by the Liberal government, which existed for some six years. There has been no indication from the government of anything to replace it. That is disconcerting.

We have heard those members boast about measures for a limited range of workers in a few select regions when the rest of Canada is getting cuts to social programs in spite of the fact that the government came into office in the best fiscal situation of any government in the country's history and of course just recorded a \$13 billion surplus for last year. I should point out that it was a Liberal surplus which the government inherited.

Let us look at the government's record. Let us look, for instance, at what Ellen Russell, an economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, said in today's papers. She said, "Since [the] Prime Minister...took power, he has been rapidly emptying the treasury", chewing through a mountain of surplus cash that was left behind.

How is that possible? Very much like the Harris regime in Ontario, what we have seen here is tax cuts, particularly the GST tax cut. My colleagues opposite are very fond of this tax cut, but we know that studies done by the government's own finance department, when it consulted Canadians, found that Canadians would have preferred an income tax cut, not the GST tax cut. We also have heard, of course, from many economists across this country who have told us that this was counter-productive and not good for the economy, that it would have been better for us to have income tax

cuts. Moreover, the government has choked off the supply of funding. It will deplete surpluses for years to come.

What does that mean? It means that the government will continue to cut programs for older workers. Let us not forget what the government did last week. It cut funding for literacy. It cut funding to women's programs. These are essential programs across this country. It struck me as alarming and surprising that this was done by a government that tried to paint itself as moderate during the last election, and since then generally, although not always clearly.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: The mask is off.

Hon. Geoff Regan: The mask is off, as my hon. colleague from Beauséjour says.

• (1520)

In fact, we saw the government cut youth summer employment. The government has cut in half the program for students to have summer jobs. I can think of dozens and dozens of non-profit organizations and small businesses in my riding alone, let alone many across the country, that are going to be suffering because of this. These businesses will not be able to hire students next summer because this program will no longer exist.

The government is cutting that funding from \$90 million a year to \$45 million a year. On average, I understand, that means 70 students per riding for all 308 ridings in this country. Let us imagine the impact of that on all those students and their families across this country as they try to afford to go back to university or start university next fall.

We have seen a cut to museums. Museums are an important part of our education as a society, not only for children but for adults as well. They are one of the things that enriches us. We heard an important question today about the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, which we are seeing no indication of support for from the government, but this is a cut to museums generally.

We have seen a cut to the efforts of volunteer organizations, which need this support. In fact, to me, one of the great programs, which the government has now cut, was this program for volunteer initiatives. This program really leveraged a lot of effort. There was a small amount going to a volunteer organization, which, because of that, was able to have many volunteers, dozens or hundreds of volunteers, involved in important activity in their community. That is gone because of this decision by the President of the Treasury Board and this government.

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We had the program known as CAP, with the community access points, which provides, of course, for computer access in communities all across this country. We have seen it in libraries. I myself have had the pleasure of attending many openings of CAP sites across my province of Nova Scotia. I have seen the delight of people in local communities, who were perhaps without computers, at having the opportunity to go to a library or a local community centre, use a computer, go online and get the information they need. We know today how much information there is out there and how valuable it is to go on the Internet to obtain information about jobs or about research for their area of study if they are students or pupils in schools.

Since coming to power, the government has cut programs aimed at assisting workers. For example, the government cut the \$3.5 billion labour market partnership agreements with a number of provinces.

• (1525)

[*Translation*]

There is also the \$17 million cut affecting the Canadian workplace skills strategy. And the list goes on.

[*English*]

It is time that this government started focusing on the priorities of Canadians, such as helping older workers, and stopped focusing on measures that will help only its supporters to the exclusion of everyone else.

That is an example, for instance, of what I was talking about with literacy.

In fact, I would think that my colleagues opposite would be concerned about the future of productivity and the competitiveness of our economy and would recognize that people who are adults trying to learn and to read and write need assistance doing so. It makes no sense to cut the funding to programs such as that, to cut the funding to organizations that are organizing that activity across this country and developing the curriculum and the teachers for literacy across this country.

We have the President of the Treasury Board who was so fond of the so-called common sense revolution in Ontario. Apparently he wants to bring the same disaster to Ottawa as well and all of the country has to suffer from that. That is unfortunate.

As some of my colleagues said earlier today, the government needs a process to carefully look at income support measures in consultation with the provinces. We need to look at the real gap in income support measures, particularly for people between 55 and 65 years of age.

I was at the human resources committee this morning, where we heard about the coming skills shortage. In many areas, that is a real problem. We will see it much more in the future. It will change the way our economy works.

However, in many communities there are still older workers who are suffering because of the closure of an industry or a downturn in an industry and who need assistance of various kinds. There must be an overall strategy for them.

I would like to say more, but I know my time is coming to a close. It seems to me that the way the government can start to respond to those people is by implementing this motion as part of a pan-Canadian national older worker strategy for citizens between 55 and 65 years of age.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my colleague ably described some of the difficult cuts to literacy programs that, in our part of Canada, Atlantic Canada, in my province of New Brunswick and in the member's province of Nova Scotia, will have a great impact on adults really trying to help themselves and improve their literacy skills, which improves their productivity in the community and allows them different employment opportunities that may not have been available to them prior to improving their literacy skills.

The member referred to projects in his own constituency, in his own province, that will probably be affected by this kind of ideological and brutal cut. I am wondering if, in the time we have, he could expand and enlighten the House as to some specific projects. He talked about CAP sites, for example, in his own community of metropolitan Halifax that will be affected by these draconian measures.

• (1530)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Speaker, I agree that these are important issues and in my riding I am very concerned about the impact they will have. In the Halifax area there are many people who are using the services of literacy groups that are providing training.

Some of them of course are new Canadians who are getting those services, but there are many people who are anglophones as well, and some francophones. We have seen that this program has been important for a range of people, including aboriginals, people with disabilities and various people in our community who benefit from these programs, whether they are literacy or other programs, that have been cut.

What surprised me was that the government, which was trying to appear to be so moderate, did this so soon, that it unveiled its true colours so early. I would have thought that it would have waited in hopes of achieving a majority government at some point and then implement its true agenda. However, what we are seeing is that the Conservatives cannot help themselves. They cannot hold back and wait for that, or perhaps they have given up. Perhaps they know they have problems already politically and that they will not achieve a majority government and, therefore, decided to start trying to achieve their true objectives early. I think what Canadians are seeing is that their real agenda is becoming very clear.

When we look at this question of the summer placement program, which has been cut in half, we as a country are trying to build a stronger economy. As we were hearing this morning in our committee, there are many areas in which we need workers. For instance, we had someone from the biotechnology sector this morning in our committee who was talking about the shortage of trained workers his sector was facing. As members can imagine, biotechnology is a pretty high-skilled area that needs people with university educations. There are many others like that.

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We have a new business in my riding, not a new business to Canada but new to us, called Research In Motion which makes the BlackBerry that members in this House and others across the country use so often. That company is another example of one that needs university graduates or people with applicable training, the kind that will help them do the work that they deal with.

If we are cutting support for students and removing the summer replacement program for students, this will make it harder for students to afford to attend university or community colleges which is counterproductive and not in the interest of our country, our economy or our future.

I, frankly, hope our colleagues across the way in the Conservative caucus will hear a lot about these cuts to literacy, to the Status of Women Canada and other organizations across the country, in the coming week when they are back in their ridings. I hope they will come back after that and start applying more and more pressure on the government that these cuts are wrong-headed, that they are going in the wrong direction, that it is not the answer for this country and that it is time to reverse them.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, first, I am pleased that the hon. member for Halifax West will support the motion. Indeed, this situation is nothing new. When the Liberal Party was in office, the program was abolished and the problems increased over the years. However, today, we can rejoice in the fact that the Liberals are now sitting with us, on the opposition benches. I think this is a positive thing.

The cuts have a number of consequences. At some point, when their EI benefits run out, older workers find themselves without an income. This means that they inevitably end up on welfare.

Here is my question. I would like to know if, in the hon. member's province, these workers find themselves in the same situation and are forced to use up their savings before relying on social assistance, or to sell their assets in order to then be eligible for help.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Speaker, I thank my honourable colleague for his question. I have the pleasure of sitting with him on the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, and I appreciate his question today.

In Nova Scotia, there are only a few places—such as Halifax—where the economy is generally fairly strong, although there are still problems.

• (1535)

Mr. Yvan Loubier (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Mr. Speaker, to start with, I wish to announce that I will be sharing my time with my distinguished colleague, the member for Joliette, with whom I have had the pleasure of sitting for many years.

I did not think that today, October 5, already many months after the first Conservative budget, we would still be discussing the merits—and the possibility—of introducing an assistance program for workers aged 55 or over.

Before the budget was drafted, I took part in various discussions with the Minister of Finance, with the Minister of Transport,

Infrastructure and Communities and with other representatives of government. These discussions left me with the hope that an assistance program for older workers would be put in place in the weeks following the budget. We are in a national emergency situation in this regard. The factories are closing, there is no longer a soft sector, there are only sectors hit by foreign competition, hit by unfair competition and acts, as we have seen at the hands of the Americans in the softwood lumber sector.

Now, various industries are under attack: furniture, textiles, clothing, agri-food and soon the high-technology sectors will also be the victims of often unfair competition. I will come back a little later to unfair competition by the so-called emerging countries.

When one is a victim of this competition a few times—and the number of times has been increasing in the past three years—factories begin to shut down, early retirements take place or quite simply there are mass lay-offs of workers who have held their jobs for 30 to 35 years at the same place, in the same region and in the same sector.

Today is October 5, and I remember what we read in the budget, that is, that the government undertook to conduct a feasibility study with a view to setting up an assistance program for older workers. This program would be similar to the one that existed until 1997, before the Liberal Party—and the member for LaSalle—Énard, who was finance minister at the time—cut this program.

We are right back where we started, and there is talk of a possible one-year pilot project. But that is not what we asked for. We did not ask the government for statistics and assumptions. The introduction of this income support program for older workers was a condition of our support for the budget, as much as the issue of fiscal imbalance. We did not want a pilot project or a one-year program. What we wanted was a program similar to the one that was cancelled in 1997.

What did that program do? It enabled workers age 55 and older, victims of mass layoffs, to benefit from financial support, not generous but appropriate, from the time of that layoff to the time of their retirement.

The program enabled those workers—often couples working in single-industry areas—to maintain a decent lifestyle until their retirement, without being forced to apply for social assistance benefits, without having to abandon their dreams of a lifetime by selling off their home, car or cottage.

Since this program was abolished by the Liberals in 1997, every member of the Bloc Québécois has met working couples in his or her region where both spouses were laid off at the same time. These couples were forced to sell their homes and all the assets they had accumulated over many years of work, including registered retirement plans, etc. They had to give up their dream of a decent retirement, in dignity, because the federal government decided in 1997 to put an end to a program that cost nothing to keep dreams alive. At that time, it amounted to \$60 million per year for these older workers. These were workers who often could not find new jobs because they had little education or because they lived in single-industry areas where the entire industry was hit at the same time.

Business of Supply

These people were often left in great distress. I myself have known workers who killed themselves because the government had let them down by robbing them of their dignity. The government decided it was worth shattering the dreams of thousands of residents and older workers to save \$60 million a year.

• (1540)

We did an evaluation. The government talks about a feasibility study, but all that is needed is a simple rule of three, it is not very complicated. It cost \$60 million a year in 1997, given the layoffs at the time. After adjusting for these layoffs and taking a certain indexing into account until today, we arrive at a maximum of \$100 million a year for a program like this to prevent broken dreams and loss of all dignity among working people 55 years of age or more. But this government is still dragging its feet. It wants a feasibility study and a pilot project.

The last fiscal year ended with a \$13 billion surplus. The Minister of Finance and the President of Treasury Board appeared, as pedantic as can be, in front of a beautiful big fat cheque saying that more than \$13 billion were being invested in paying down the debt.

Could not \$100 million of these \$13 billion have been used to help older workers?

They are turning their backs on workers, as we saw in the softwood lumber issue. How many times have we in the Bloc Québécois asked for loan guarantees to save jobs and plants all over the regions, in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada? But the current government would not listen, just like the previous government.

How many times have we asked the government to investigate dumping, countervailing duties and unfair competition, which has been proven? In Europe, they are looking at unfair competition and just proved in a recent report that there was unfair competition and predatory practices on the part of countries like China, India and Brazil.

What are predatory practices? Countries like China or Vietnam have planned economies. They are not free markets. Real production costs and competition are the least of their concerns.

These countries engage in predatory practices, that is to say, they sell their products for less than the regular cost of production. They kill our industries, throw thousands of our citizens out of work, and when the industry is completely shattered, knocked flat, they seize the market and move in. These are predatory practices.

The Canadian government—be it Liberal or Conservative—is probably one of the governments in the world that conducts the fewest investigations into the unfair competition practised by its trading partners. There have been no investigations undertaken by the federal government into the unfair competition engaged by China or Brazil in the agri-food sector, for example. One might say that Canada is afraid to conduct such investigations. It was very proud to welcome China into the World Trade Organization. That is all very well, but China, like the other members of the WTO, is going to have to abide by the fair competition rules and abide by the most favoured nations rules. That is not the case at present.

The federal government sits idly by and calls this normal competition. It is not normal competition! When it is cheaper to

bring bentwood in from China and make plywood out of it here, than using lumber from our forests in Quebec or Ontario or British Columbia, the situation has reached the disaster point.

I would like me to send the federal government this message: in my region in particular, working men and women have been laid off from Kimberly-Clark, for example, and from Olymel as well, because of competition in the pork industry, and from AirBoss in the textile and shoe manufacturing industry. Those companies, and the men and women who work there, are affected by competition and they need us. They need us to make things easier for them. Entrepreneurs need our help too, because often, when massive layoffs like this happen, younger workers are the first to go because they have no seniority. And then the older workers follow them.

If we brought back a program like POWA, which existed until 1997, entrepreneurs could keep their younger workers; as for older workers, it would up to them to decide to leave and make room for them, and companies could invest for the future in a qualified, younger workforce, for a number of years.

• (1545)

We talk about the workforce shortage we have today, but it will be even worse in the years to come.

This would be one way of encouraging training for younger people and allowing older workers to preserve their dignity until they retire.

[*English*]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the member's remarks. That is why I would like to make some remarks, because the member says that right now Quebec does have some real disastrous situations and crises. That is what we want to target. In other parts of the country right now we have the opposite problem; we have a labour shortage.

I would like to see us support the motion if we could clearly focus on older workers in vulnerable communities and especially those affected by downsizing or closures. Such a change would ensure that we target resources to maximize the support for those regions most in need, while making our first commitment toward retaining older workers.

We recognize the merits of today's motion. I sit on committee with the member who brought forward the motion. I understand that he is genuinely very concerned. The intent of his motion is more about helping the most vulnerable.

I ask the member if he would agree that we refocus today's motion so that it would be more about displaced workers and more about support measures because as members have said previously, many of these older workers do want to be back in the workforce. Maybe we can find tools to help them get back into the workforce. Would the member agree to this more prudent course of action?

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[Translation]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Speaker, I am now starting to understand the Conservatives a little better. When it suits them, they act immediately. This is often a matter of ideology. They act immediately and they have no hesitation about spending billions of dollars for defence, for hiring new police officers, for law enforcement, and so on. But when it does not suit them, they talk about studies and they talk about refocusing the motion and the program.

You do not have to be an Einstein to understand what was there before the older worker adjustment program was abolished in 1997. The very simple idea was to provide assistance for workers who were 55 or over, to provide them with a bit of a hand up, particularly when they had been hit by a massive layoff, a plant closing, often in one-industry regions. Spouses lost their jobs at the same time. The couple then had to liquidate all their assets, everything they had managed to put away over 30 or 35 years of working for the same company.

That program cost \$60 million a year. Today I heard that the government had incurred an \$800 million penalty for fast-tracking its purchase of military aircraft to meet American security requirements. That represents eight years of assistance for older workers. It costs \$100 million a year. That means that with the amount of that penalty, the government could give 57-year-old workers dignity for eight years, until their retirement. They would not be forced to sell everything.

Is \$100 million a year too much to ask when the government has just invested billions and billions of dollars in military weapons? It is shameful to try and refocus a motion when couples are struggling and are asking us to act quickly to help them.

[English]

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is a fascinating subject, one which is perhaps the most underappreciated issue in Canada today. In many ways it really is the demographic time bomb to which my hon. colleague referred.

Way back when the mandatory age of retirement was put forth, the life expectancy was only in the fifties. Now for women it is 82 years and for men it is 79 years. If we project into the future, we will have a major demographic time bomb that will affect everything from health care to social programs and indeed to economics. If we look at the number of workers versus the number of retirees, that ratio will shrink so precipitously that it will have an enormous and profound impact. Legislators across our country are not dealing with it.

I would ask my hon. friend if he thinks that a couple of solutions might be, one, the abolition of the mandatory age of retirement and two, that we facilitate workers to continue to upgrade throughout their careers into the future. If we were to do those two things, it would enable us to have the economic base to supply our social programs and to continue with a vibrant and strong economy.

• (1550)

[Translation]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Speaker, I will briefly answer my Liberal colleague. He is talking about a tool to help deal with a labour shortage. We are offering him a tool worth \$100 million a year.

In many companies, especially in my riding, if older workers had had the opportunity to leave first when half the workforce was laid off, and the employer had kept the younger workers, some of the older workers could have worked part-time to train the younger workers and make them more productive. The older workers could simply have stopped working until their retirement.

Now we have a shortage of specialized labour. Why? Because we are not giving young people the opportunity to train. A program like this one would give them that opportunity. Older workers, not younger ones, would be the first to leave the company. The younger ones would stay and form a productive workforce for the future, until the company recovered after boosting its productivity and competitiveness.

This is an ideal tool, especially for the regions, and we need to use it. The Liberals did not understand this before the Conservatives came to power. We hope that the Conservatives will be more on the ball.

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I rise with ambiguous feelings, rather like the member for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot. I am actually a bit annoyed by the fact that my colleague from Chambly—Borduas was forced to propose a motion that should be self-evident, given that we have adopted it repeatedly in this House, sometimes unanimously.

I have not been a member for very long, since 2000, but if I recall correctly, this is at least the fourth or fifth time that the Bloc Québécois has proposed a motion concerning an assistance program for older workers. This time, it is in a context in which all parties, before the election, voted in favour of such a program. It is strange how democracy can get people thinking on the eve of an election—and we will soon have an election.

I feel a little as though I am in the movie *Groundhog Day*, that film where the weatherman meets the groundhog to find out whether it will see its shadow and how long the winter will last. The weatherman realizes at some point that he is reliving the same events day after day. In rising today to speak to this legitimate motion that should have already—and long ago—become reality, I get the feeling of being in that movie, and it is very annoying.

Nevertheless I am confident. In fact the current situation in several regions of Canada and Quebec means that such a program is a necessary tool. It is not the only one, that is very clear. Still, it is a necessary tool for ensuring that the whole territory is covered. It is true in Quebec and it must be true elsewhere in Canada.

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All this obviously goes along with other measures to bring about economic diversification in monoindustrial regions. I will tell you about a monoindustrial situation in the riding of Joliette. I can assure you that, if the parties present do not vote in favour of this motion, it will be a pretty strong argument for re-electing a member from the Bloc Québécois in the riding of Joliette.

In the region of Saint-Michel-des-Saints, two factories have closed their doors. These factories belonged to Louisiana Pacific. We hope that these closures will be temporary, but we never know. All the workers at these two factories in Saint-Michel-des-Saints are now unemployed. In the waferboard factory, 218 jobs have been lost. At the sawmill, also in Saint-Michel-des-Saints, 104 jobs have been lost. That means that 322 people in this community have lost their jobs.

These direct job losses bring about indirect job losses. Everyone understands that. Subcontractors used to work for Louisiana Pacific, doing electrical maintenance, keeping the forest roads in shape, and hauling logs out of the forest. In all, 229 indirect jobs have been lost.

And what about the induced jobs? If we add the 322 persons who lost their jobs to the 229 others who also lost theirs, we realize that fewer people will eat at the local restaurant, fewer people will go to the local cinema and fewer people will buy things in general. That means that service activity in that community will be affected.

According to estimates, 87 jobs were lost since the closing, which was about a month or a month and a half ago. In all, 638 jobs were lost in that community in recent weeks. And what do all those jobs represent for a community like Saint-Michel-des-Saints? It means that about 30% of all the jobs have disappeared. Of course Saint-Michel-des-Saints, where some 1,275 people work, is not the only community affected. Saint-Zénon, another community not too far away, where 482 people work is also affected. Let us say that the numbers are total numbers.

If we took only Saint-Michel-des-Saints, that would mean that 50% of the workforce in unemployed because of the closing. But the other village is not far. Let us not fall into demagoguery contrary to the hon. members opposite and let us add the working population of Saint-Zénon, which is comprised of 482 workers. So, of the 1,757 people who constitute the workforce of that community, 638 people lost their jobs. Thirty percent of the population is now unemployed.

Of course, other economic activities could appear, but that will not happen overnight. Right now, the community is working seriously on all aspects of tourism, but to start businesses of that kind, infrastructure is needed.

Speaking of infrastructure, there is one example that the government of Quebec and all the local stakeholders have been lobbying for but that the federal government has constantly refused. I am talking about the road between Saint-Michel-des-Saints and Manouane, which is an Attikamekw community of 2,000 inhabitants who are completely isolated because the federal government refuses to partner with the Quebec government to build that road.

• (1555)

It would be a way not only to relieve this community from isolation, but also to create recreational and tourism activities.

So, in that situation, 30% of the population is unemployed. There will be restructuring at Louisiana-Pacific because, even if it reopens its doors, it will have to do so on other bases. They closed the plant, not on a whim, but because it was no longer competitive for various reasons that we know well and which the Bloc Québécois has reminded the House of several times: the softwood lumber crisis—the federal government, be it the Liberals or the Conservatives, did nothing—the cost of fibre, the Canadian dollar, which is much too high because of the Bank of Canada's practices, and also energy costs.

So, when Louisiana-Pacific will reopen, there will be fewer jobs, because it will have to be more competitive.

As the member for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot was mentioning, in a situation where a company reopens a plant and re-hires people—but fewer then before—who must suffer? It is the young workers. So, instead of depriving youth of a job, could we not ensure that those who have already given a good part of their life to a company—we are talking about years and decades—and to a region and who contributed to the social, economic and cultural activity of that region, have the opportunity, in certain circumstances, to retire with dignity? Otherwise, what will be the option? Will we see youth leave the community and the region? Indeed, if they leave Saint-Michel, they will settle in Joliette or Montreal and never return.

Consequently, this measure is not only a measure of justice for older workers, in certain circumstances—and I will get back to this—but also a measure to ensure the stability of the region's population. Of course, I am aware that among the Conservatives—I hope not all of them—there are some who think that developing the regions is not important, that we could shut down some regions as simply as that.

The plant closes, everything closes, including the post office and other federal services. That is not the way I see it. I believe that we have to give something to the community. In the case of Saint-Michel-des-Saints, as I mentioned previously, we hope that the plant will reopen. However, if it should close it will take several years to turn around the economic activities in that region. Let us give that community a tool to help it get through this crisis.

But no, the Minister of Industry, with his views developed at the Institut économique de Montréal, believes that if there are no more jobs, the people just have to leave. They will go to Alberta. There are lots of jobs in Alberta. Is that being respectful of a community like Saint-Michel-des-Saints? No, we must provide the means for survival to this community, and as I have said, it is not the only means.

Business of Supply

As a matter of fact, the committee worked on the criteria. I want to refer to them because, contrary to what the Liberal member said earlier, it does not apply to everyone, whatever the circumstance. First, it applies to someone who is 55 or older. That is the first thing. Second, it applies in the case of a mass layoff or the closing of a business. Those are themselves important criteria. In addition, an applicant must have been an active member of the labour market for at least 10 years during the previous 30 years. So, we are speaking of people who have contributed in terms of economic activity, who have paid for our collective tools with their taxes.

It is also important, as part of the range of tools that we have for evaluating the skills of different people, that we recognize the gap between acquired skills and the skills now required in the labour market. The situation is not at all like that during the crisis at the beginning of the 1980s or the 1990s, for example. There are new tools available. Emploi-Québec has new tools for helping people get new jobs, for facilitating access to training. It is being done right now in Saint-Michel-des-Saints. There are people who have lost their jobs and who are now completing health and safety courses to be able to work in construction during the time that the factory is closed.

People want to work, but some may not have had the chance to acquire the required skills. Personally, I witnessed the closure of Vickers in 1989, and I think that the member for Chambly—Borduas and I were both at the Confédération des syndicats nationaux at the time. There were people who had been working at Vickers since the age of 15, and they had been promised a job for life. In 1989, the plant closed. Some 35- or 40-year-old workers were completely illiterate, through no fault of their own. The system just came and grabbed them when they turned 15. They were told not to waste time in school since they were assured of a job for life. They found themselves in a fix.

Unfortunately for them, they were not 55 years old yet, because there was a program in those days ensuring that workers 55 and older who had been with Vickers for a number of years and did not have the skills required to find a new job on the labour market end their professional lives with dignity.

• (1600)

Workers between the ages of 35 and 40 can expect to have access to classes, receive core training and retrain as welders or mechanics. That is not true for everyone, however.

Out of respect for human dignity, I expect all members of this House to vote in favour of the motion introduced by the Bloc Québécois.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by congratulating my two colleagues from Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot and Joliette for their speeches. I think they shed some light on facts that illustrate both the problem and the solutions very well. My colleague from Joliette talked about the parameters that must guide us as we implement the income support program for older workers.

I would also like to emphasize another point and ask my colleague from Joliette about it. I would like to highlight the work done by my two aforementioned colleagues on the problem of foreign market invasion, lack of control, and lack of Canadian government measures

to protect our industry. I know how hard they have worked over the past few years to avoid this catastrophe.

It seems that because the Canadian government failed to implement these measures, the catastrophe is now upon us. Of course, the main thing now is to protect the people who have lost their jobs.

I know that my colleague has seen the big picture in the ridings, particularly in Quebec ridings. My question is about his riding. What are the positive short-term effects that can already be seen in his riding with respect to economic renewal, for example? Earlier, he mentioned the shock caused by the closure of Louisiana-Pacific and the other business. What effect would reinstating POWA have on regional economic vitality?

• (1605)

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Mr. Speaker, again I would like to congratulate the hon. member for Chambly—Borduas, who has continued to lead this fight. He took over from other Bloc Québécois critics. We have really been working on this for a long time, as I said at the beginning of my speech. I hope he will be the last Bloc critic to have to lead this fight for a support program for older workers.

As he said, this proposal is not defensive but aimed instead at giving people and communities the tools they need to face foreign competition and new situations. In the case of Louisiana-Pacific, it concerns the forest industry crisis in Quebec. Louisiana-Pacific closed its two plants in Saint-Michel, and people are working on getting it started up again. It is clear, though, that when they try to restart a company of this kind, it cannot have the same number of workers because savings will have to be made and the plant will need to become more productive.

Related activities will therefore have to be developed as well in order to maintain the labour pool, especially in the area of recreation and tourism. In order to do this, a minimum amount of economic activity will have to be maintained during the transition period and people who are unemployed or temporarily laid off will need the means to go and buy bread and butter in order to keep all the services going at a minimum level. If services start to close, one after the other, not only will Louisiana-Pacific be discouraged from reopening its plant but the recreational and tourist activities developing around Taureau lake will be seriously affected. American or European tourists rarely want cross a ghost town to reach a magnificent nature reserve in north Lanaudière. This is what politicians and all those concerned about the public good should concentrate on.

It is the same in Maskinongé. I know that the member for Berthier—Maskinongé has certainly spoken about it.

The same goes for the furniture industry. When the free trade agreement was signed between Canada and Mexico 10 years ago, we were told that this industry would disappear. But no, it adjusted, although there were job losses. At the time, there was a program, POWA. We need this tool back for the good of all communities, especially the resource-based regions in Quebec, but all of Canada as well.

Business of Supply

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for my colleague from Joliette, who was the Bloc Québécois critic for international trade for quite some time. He is very familiar with the file concerning the Quebec bicycle industry, which has been having a very hard time.

The Minister of Industry and hon. member for Beauce, where there is a bicycle factory, refused to provide any assistance to help this industry get back on its feet, or to help the workers of this industry as they face the reality of globalization.

How does he think this Conservative ideology reconciles everything that is happening in the bicycle industry, while it is impossible for businesses to restructure themselves? At the very least, POWA must be put in place. This minister, the Minister of Industry, belongs to a government that is dragging its feet in the POWA file. I would like him to talk about the ideology behind this kind of decision.

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

My greatest concern is that the Conservatives and the ministers responsible for this file have an ideological vision, rather than a pragmatic vision based on the real needs of the people and the regional economies. Once again, this is true in Quebec and in the rest of Canada.

We have reason to worry when, even despite the Canadian International Trade Tribunal ruling that dumping was taking place and hurting the industry, the government refuses the bicycle industry something that the World Trade Organization and Canadian legislation allows.

It is as though they are saying “Forget about it”, as though they would prefer to forget about entire regions that are having temporary difficulties adapting to a new reality.

Pro Cycle, which is in the Minister of Industry's riding, and Rallye have made tremendous efforts to deal with competition from China and Vietnam. They need time to adapt. I have seen robots install bicycle cables. It takes time to get there and this eliminates jobs. We need POWA, safeguards and a real support program for the manufacturing industry, which we do not have.

• (1610)

[*English*]

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for the beautiful riding of South Shore—St. Margaret's.

I thank the member for Chambly—Borduas for raising this issue. I also reassure him that Canada's new government shares his concerns regarding the distinct challenges facing older workers.

Our government recognizes and appreciates the hardships faced by older workers who face unexpected changes to their work environment in communities and regions with limited employment alternatives. However, what the member opposite sees as simply challenges, we also see as an opportunity.

There are strong indications that people can and want to work longer, even if only on a part time basis. While all Canadian workers

face new challenges to adapt to the fast-changing global economy, such challenges are often especially difficult for older workers, particularly following the unexpected loss of employment.

As statistical data has constantly found, when older workers lose their jobs, they tend to remain unemployed longer compared to their younger counterparts. Some older workers lack the education and skills needed for many of today's jobs. Others have skills that are not easily transferred to jobs found in the new knowledge-based economy. Moreover, some employers are reluctant to invest in retraining for workers who may be close to retirement.

Overcoming such realities represents a challenge for Canada. Losing the knowledge and experience of older workers would represent a loss we cannot afford in an era increasingly marked by labour shortages. However, what we identify as a challenge, can sometimes be an opportunity in disguise. Older workers provide a valuable contribution to the labour market, which is important to the economic well-being of the country. By ensuring the continued participation of older workers, we are not only helping to address labour market shortages but we also simultaneously ensure that the vast experience and expertise will be passed on to future generations.

We should continue to encourage older workers to share their skills and talents well into retirement age, as their participation in the workforce will play an important role in meeting the demands of the labour market. Indeed, in the context of an aging society, Canada's older workers are becoming an increasingly critical component of Canada's labour force.

As indicated by a recent OECD report, the labour market situation of older workers has improved considerably in recent years. Employment rates for older workers have increased rapidly over the decade, from 43% in 1995 to 55% in 2005. Older workers have a lower unemployment rate at 6% than the total workforce at 6.5% in 2006. At the same time, many employers in Canada, such as Alberta's oil patch, are experiencing skills shortages and lagging behind their potential due to a lack of workers.

As our population ages, older workers hold the key to ensuring continued growth and prosperity, and offer a means of helping address Canada's labour shortages. As Judy Cutler of the Canadian Association of Retired Persons recently stated:

There's a shortage of workers, and as more and more people retire, there will be a greater shortage....We have older workers who want to work. Why not embrace their expertise?

More specific, we need to find new ways to reintegrate older workers into Canada's labour force. We need to offer support to older workers who may be in danger of losing their jobs. With access to opportunity, we know these Canadians can keep contributing their enormous talent and experience to our economy.

Business of Supply

That is why budget 2006 committed to conducting feasibility studies to look at measures to help displaced older workers. This wide-ranging study will examine the need for improved training and enhanced income support, including early retirement benefits as proposed in the motion of the hon. member.

We do recognize the challenges faced by older workers, particularly those in communities that are dependent upon single industries. Turning to the forestry sector, we are spending \$400 million over the next two years to boost the competitiveness of this vital Canadian industry. This includes funding to support worker adjustment.

• (1615)

In the meantime, we are offering unemployed older workers practical assistance, such as skills development and new work experience. Through part II of employment insurance, we are helping older workers to access the tools, programs and services they need to upgrade their skills and successfully re-enter the job market.

Under these innovative measures, older workers across the country receive training, work experience and support to start their own businesses. At the same time, many are receiving income support while they participate in the program.

Across Canada more than 80,000 older workers are benefiting from these employment programs each year. In fact, nearly 230,000 displaced older workers receive \$1.4 billion in income benefits each year.

We want to harness the skills, energy and leadership of older workers in jobs that benefit their communities. In short, the government wants to lend a hand to help older workers get back to work. We want to work with Canadian unions, employers and communities to find new ways to tap into the wisdom and experience of older workers. We want to find ways to empower older workers to continue their participation in the labour market, in our forests, our fisheries, offices and factories.

Our government's focus is on getting results on issues that matter most to Canadians. We want to do it in a way that will benefit all Canadians now and in the future.

As older workers represent the single largest pool of labour supply, carrying out an early retirement program, without fully assessing the labour market impacts of this initiative, would be irresponsible. That is why we need to take time to consider the results of our feasibility study and make an informed decision.

Additionally, we will build on lessons learned from our older workers pilot project initiative, conducted in partnership with provinces, to improve federal and provincial employment programming to better meet the needs of older workers. However, our government's first priority is to assist those older workers seeking employment to find and retain jobs.

That is why I cannot in good conscience support this motion.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his comments.

He must certainly recognize—just as his colleague who will speak after him, the member for South Shore—St. Margaret's—the difficulties we are now having with the workforce in rural Nova Scotia. Indeed, there are problems with fishing, with the herring industry, the salted fish industry, which is suffering a setback. Some people have a hard time making a real career of it, working a full year. It is important for these people to have support, and we are talking about support here. Also, it is important for them to have a training opportunity, to have access to continuing education. If we take the tools away from them, such as support for literacy education, which is the key for retraining, reshaping and preparing for the new economy and new jobs, we are in fact reducing investments where they should be increased. Investments in vocational training are also reduced. In southern Nova Scotia, only three months of the fiscal year are recognized. There used to be more money allotted for the development of human resources, for getting these people in training programs.

But we get no response on that from the government. We see no investment and a setback of \$1 billion in social programs. We should increase investments in public Internet access sites in communities such as Maitland Bridge, which the member for South Shore—St. Margaret's must know well and where we should be investing. Instead, we are telling them that we are not investing anymore.

Therefore, how will this government meet the needs and expectations of people in remote rural communities, in Atlantic provinces as well as in Quebec, in Ontario, in western Canada and in the north?

[*English*]

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Speaker, I will discuss those issues with the member for South Shore—St. Margaret's.

We certainly appreciate the hardships being faced by older workers who face unexpected changes in their employment, environment and communities. We are focused on providing the tools needed for retraining and helping them move on to other jobs.

We should not forget, though, that we need to encourage older workers. They all possess a set of skills, even life skills, that they can share with other workers. They can help us with labour shortages and with regional difficulties, as mentioned by the member.

• (1620)

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, how could the Government of Canada improve the labour market flexibility to support adjustments in the labour market?

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Speaker, the efficient operation of labour markets will continue to be central to what the government will do to help in the area of market flexibility.

Business of Supply

Canada has well functioning markets and, in particular, the labour markets. We have looked at what we need to do so we can be flexible so workers can move from one sector to another. The days of one job for one's life are perhaps gone. The flexibility needs to be there.

We are also exercising leadership to secure the efficient operation of the national labour market. The federal government is uniquely positioned to facilitate a cross-Canada approach. We must be able to look at this as the federal government from a pan-Canadian point of view, rather than simply looking at it in regional or community situations. We must, as the government, react as the Government of Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. member if he really understands the goal of the motion. Does he understand that the implementation of a program for older worker adjustment, or POWA, does not preclude the implementation of other measures to help certain workers go back to work? I hope he realizes that we are not asking for charity.

Of course, there is a category of workers who want nothing better than to be able to take classes and go back to work. The category of workers that this motion is aimed at is the hard to place workers. That does not mean that, during the period between end of employment—when they can benefit from POWA—and retirement, they could not go back to the labour market. These people could, of course, earn money for their work and it would be deducted from the POWA amount right up to their retirement date. One does not preclude the other.

Does the hon. member fully grasp the purpose of this measure? Does he understand that the workers are not asking for charity, but for an appropriate program, and that their reasons are motivated by the exception and not by the rule?

[*English*]

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Speaker, I understand the purpose. The question is will it accomplish what the member would like it to accomplish, or are we looking at a cross-Canada approach to this, or trying to fix it in a way that may not fix it?

As I said in my remarks, the statistics tell us that as older workers are displaced from their jobs, they may be unemployed for a longer period of time. Support would certainly need to be there as one of the mechanisms. The true mechanisms are getting back to work. We have to look at the labour shortages from a pan-Canadian point of view as to what is the best solution.

We recognize that these workers share skills, mindsets and life skills that are so valuable to other employees out there. We certainly would like to put those to the best advantage.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the question to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment is as follows: the hon. member for Don Valley East, Firearms Registry.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to rise in debate today. I listened very closely to the comments from my colleague, the hon. member for Elgin—Middlesex—London. It was very clear that he had a good

understanding of the issues that surround older workers getting back into the workforce.

This debate concerning older workers is not a debate that is about to go away in the short term, but is certainly one that our new Conservative government will grapple with and work at trying to find some real answers, not simply political posturing but real answers.

This is a very timely issue. At a time when the average age of workers in the Canadian labour force is increasing and according to demographic projections will continue to increase, we want to be sure we have the policies and programs in place that will support older workers.

This government understands the reasons why the opposition has brought forward today's motion. We share its concern for the well-being of Canada's older workers, but at the same time, with the Canadian economy facing skill and labour shortages, it is also important to recognize that many older unemployed workers still want to make a contribution to the Canadian economy and should be encouraged and able to do so, especially in the member's home province.

Henri Gaudin pointed out in the *Montreal Gazette*:

Workers' early retirement is one of the least-discussed problems facing the economy of the Montreal region and Quebec as a whole. The issue affects not only older workers but everyone, including young people.

That's because society's prosperity depends on a growing workforce. Quebec's workforce will start to shrink sooner than most of us assume. If current trends continue for births, immigration and retirement age, demographers at the Institut la statistique de Quebec say that the province's workforce will decline starting in 2013.

When we are asked to look at the issue of early retirement income support programs for older workers, such as the opposition motion prompts us to do, we need to bear such considerations in mind. Chiefly, we need to have appropriate support mechanisms in place which are capable of helping Canada's older workers to remain active labour market participants.

It should be noted that many of these workers are eligible for assistance under part II of the EI program. Under EI part II, unemployed individuals, including older workers, may qualify for active re-employment benefits to assist them in finding and maintaining new employment. These programs include training, work experience and support to become self-employed. As a matter of interest, over 40,000 older workers, defined as those aged 55 and over, participated in part II programming last year.

As I said earlier, this is a timely issue, but I should also mention that it is not a new one. The Government of Canada has had experience with income support measures for older workers for many years. In the context of today's debate, it might be useful to look at some of that experience.

Business of Supply

In 1987, almost 20 years ago, the Conservative government of the day introduced a program to provide an income safety net for laid off older workers. It was called the program for older worker adjustment, commonly known as POWA. It was targeted to older workers of pre-retirement age, workers who had lost their jobs as part of a mass layoff. It was hoped that POWA would encourage an integrated and comprehensive approach to older worker adjustment, under which provincial governments and employers would contribute to the solution.

The program concluded after nearly a decade in operation as many observers realized the program was failing to meet the objectives. Indeed, actual experience with the program showed that it negatively influenced workers' decisions to return to work. It is not as simple as coming up with an alternative or some type of government program. The program also has to be tracked to ensure that it is actually able and capable of delivering what we want it to deliver.

• (1625)

POWA was discontinued in 1997 when the then Liberal government shifted away from the passive income support programs toward active labour market and re-employment measures under a reformed employment insurance program. As the former Liberal minister of human resources, the current hon. member for Westmount—Ville-Marie, stated in defence of such actions, and I would agree, older workers want to continue working. They do not want to sit at home and get a cheque. They want to take advantage of active return to work measures.

Following the demise of POWA, an older worker pilot project initiative was introduced. It tested different approaches to supporting unemployed older workers. These pilot projects looked at how the unemployment benefit and support measures under part II of the EI program might be used to support the special needs of older unemployed workers. A key feature of these pilot programs was that the unemployed older worker did not need to qualify for EI in order to obtain support. The older worker pilot project initiative ran until May of this year.

While the experience of the pilot project is still being evaluated in detail, some preliminary conclusions may be made which I wish to underline here today. First, the best outcomes were achieved with approaches that include employment assistance services together with some combination of training, marketing and/or work experience. Second, approaches that include 100% wage subsidies were the least effective. Third, a project approach involving groups of older workers produced the best results. Finally, flexible programming and attention to individuals were key ingredients of the success.

Programs must provide sufficient time for older participants to learn new skills. Training must be practical and relevant, and a long term approach will allow for more effective use of funds. Clearly, we have learned some interesting lessons from these pilots, lessons that can guide us in the future.

We know that older workers face challenges in today's labour market, for instances, some do not have the education needed for many of today's jobs, some have skills that cannot be easily transferred to the kinds of jobs that are available in today's

knowledge based economy, and employers may not be open to investing in workers who are close to retirement.

The bottom line is that the government is concerned about the needs of older workers and, as outlined above, it already provides support for older workers on a variety of levels.

On the specific issue of early retirement, budget 2006 has committed to carrying out a feasibility study to examine the long term needs of older workers. We welcome the interest of our colleagues in the House on this important issue. We are looking forward to working with them in the future, so that we can all achieve our shared objective which is to help older workers live and work to their full potential.

However, I cannot support the motion as it would clearly pre-empt the results of the feasibility study, which our government is about to announce, a study based on extensive research on the needs and the contributions of older workers.

Every region of the country is facing a labour shortage. In the east we are facing a labour shortage of younger workers who are migrating to western Canada. In Quebec we have an aging society, as we do in the rest of the country. We have to look at the entire problem, not just specific parts of it. We have to find some type of solution that we can apply from coast to coast to coast in this country.

In my own region, as the member for West Nova alluded to, we have an aging workforce in the fishery. The fishery is a unique issue because it requires decades of knowledge to become a capable and able fisherman. One does not just go out on a boat one day and learn all of the charts, learn where the fish are, understand the ocean, understand the habits of the fish that one is chasing, and become a competent fisherman.

The average age of a fisherman in Nova Scotia in the South Shore area in particular, but in all of southwest Nova Scotia, is 53 to 55 years of age. It is a very dangerous environment. It is very difficult on older workers. We are rapidly coming to a point where those fishermen will be looking to get out of the fishery and we are looking for younger fishermen to replace them. That is becoming a very serious issue that we are facing. That is just one example. There are hundreds of examples like that throughout the country.

• (1630)

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think my colleague understands the situation quite well and he has pointed out a lot of solutions. I agree with him that income support alone is not the answer. We have to look at the community itself and at the support it is receiving to permit people to live and thrive there. There are instances where income support is necessary. We need to invest in the education and training of these people.

Business of Supply

My colleague alluded to the fishery. I have been dealing with a gentleman who is about my age, 22 or 23. Things are difficult for him. He does not own his own vessel. He wants to get out of the fishery but he needs retraining. He has the perfect qualifications for assistance under existing programs at HRSDC, but there are no more funds. There are no more funds available out of the Yarmouth office. Many people in my community are facing these same problems and they are calling my office looking for help. I am sure the member has many people in his community who are doing the same thing as well.

We have a lot of community organizations looking at literacy. It does not square the circle of what my colleague is saying and what the frontbenchers of his party are doing. The government cut the labour market agreement, cut money for ACOA, cut unemployment, cut the Status of Women, cut literacy training, and reduced funding for training for older workers.

• (1635)

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Mr. Speaker, the issue with older workers is a serious issue. It goes far beyond simple rhetoric and partisan comments that we are all quite capable of making from both sides of the House.

In budget 2006, we made a commitment to look at the crisis facing Canadian workers and the regions of this country. We need to study in detail the needs of older workers. We need to look at how we could enable them to stay in the workforce through a myriad of support programs, some of which will be education. The point was made earlier that in today's workforce very few people stay at the same job. They will probably have quite a few different jobs and continual retraining throughout their working career. That is the workforce we have today.

In areas like forestry, fishery and agriculture, as workers get older, they get injured, and their bodies start to break down. It is very difficult for older workers to stay in the active labour market.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): We have enough time for a one minute question and a one minute response. The hon. member for Chambly—Borduas .

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to draw the attention of my colleague to the fragility of his argument. Is he aware that his remarks have no credibility for the following reason? His whole argument is based on the need to do a study in order to implement POWA.

No program has been more reviewed by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. In fact, there was a report on it in 2001. Last year, another report full of recommendations was released. The issue has been studied extensively.

How is it that, for a program that will cost approximately \$50 million to \$75 million per year, we ask for studies while they have been done and that, when it comes to armament, for instance, which costs \$17 billion, we move forward without any study and wait until after the House adjourns? Furthermore, as my colleague pointed out earlier, there are cuts worth \$1 billion to social programs.

Is my colleague aware of the vulnerability and lack of credibility of his argument?

[*English*]

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Mr. Speaker, speaking of weak arguments, anytime the government spends taxpayers' hard earned dollars, it should know exactly how it is spending those dollars and where those dollars are going. If we are looking at a program that will cost \$50 million or \$60 million, we had better know where that money is being spent and what we are going to get in return for it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my colleague from Richmond—Arthabaska.

First, I would like to acknowledge the worthwhile initiative of my party, the Bloc Québécois, in renewing the debate about the program for assistance to older workers who are victims of massive layoffs.

It was imperative that the Bloc Québécois ask for this debate because the Conservative government seems to want to put us to sleep with its nice promises and very limited action.

In the throne speech and even the last budget, the Conservative government announced that it would deal with this issue. However, it merely ordered a feasibility study of a possible program to support older workers about which we have yet to hear a thing.

And yet, all the requisite studies have been carried out, not once but twice. They are available. All the government has to do is read them and set up the program.

I would even say to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development to open her ears. She would hear the repeated cries for help from groups, unions and laid-off workers.

Unfortunately, as we see every day, the Conservative government has no interest in social groups or the unemployed.

Conservatives believe that people who are unemployed are lazy or do not want to work. Thus, they believe that it is no use helping those who lose their jobs because, for the Conservatives, the dollar sign is more important than the dignity of an employer and an employee, especially given the huge surpluses they have posted year after year.

However, workers who are victims of mass layoffs, just like others who are unemployed, are entitled to their dignity. They also have the right to keep the fruits of their life-long labour and to preserve their hard-earned assets.

The Bloc Québécois feels it is unacceptable for the Conservative government to delay establishing an income support program for older workers given their unique situation. We are asking that appropriate action be taken to meet their specific needs.

The Bloc Québécois reiterates that such a program should be available to all older workers who are victims of massive layoffs and who cannot return to the workforce, without differentiation or discrimination

Business of Supply

According to rumours, the Conservatives will set up a program, but it will be a pale shadow of POWA. They would like to implement the program only in certain regions and for specific sectors.

I do not see which objective criteria or which principles one could use to justify such discrimination. In my beautiful Eastern Townships of Quebec, 10,000 industrial jobs were lost in the last three years.

By prioritizing some sectors over others, the government would be saying to textile workers in Sherbrooke, Magog or Coaticook that their job was worth more to the Conservatives than the jobs at TPI Plastiques in Coaticook, the jobs in the furniture industry at Shermag in Scotstown or the jobs in the food industry at Olymel in Magog. That does not cut it.

We can't create artificial categories based on subjective factors, when workers in the furniture or the food industry have the same needs as those in the textile or the forest industry.

People really need an income support program for older workers. Older workers affected by massive layoffs urgently need such a program, because more and more plants are closing.

I have been to many of these plants since I was elected. Some have shut down, some are still open and make a profit, while others are in dire straits. It is for the workers in these plants that we must act now.

When I meet older workers in vulnerable industries, I can feel their uneasiness. They are worried, because workers age 55 to 65 are the main victims of massive layoffs.

Older workers often have little education. Many started working when they were 14 or 15 years old to help provide for the family at a time where life was much harder than it is today.

● (1640)

Some people even have serious difficulties with reading and writing. In the era of the Internet, the BlackBerry and the iPod, you will understand that this does not make things easy. My mother tore her hair out if she had to program a VCR. They are not all in the best situation for learning, either. It is not always realistic to ask them just to go back to the classroom.

Older workers also often have long experience in the company that is closing down. The possibility of finding a job after 25, 30, 35 or even 40 years at the same plant is slim, particularly when the job they worked at was very specialized and simply no longer exists in a labour market that is in a perpetual state of flux. Older workers are also victims of their age when it comes time for hiring.

Relocating is not always a solution. Relocating people means that money becomes short in the community; Rona closes down, the grocery store closes and the schools close. People start to wonder why their village is becoming a ghost town.

Employer-paid group insurance policies are often a barrier to hiring older workers, because costs are higher than for a young worker. I can even offer the example of my neighbour, who applied for a job. He was not selected, not because he was 57 years old, but because he was overqualified. This is another point.

What is the current situation for older workers? What signal are we sending them? We are telling them that we will offer them no assistance, no program that meets their needs. That is most unfortunate, and it is why the Bloc Québécois is urging the government to act. At this time, an older worker who has been unable to find a new job during his employment insurance benefit period is compelled to apply for social assistance. To qualify for that, the worker must run through all his assets and is forced to draw on savings. He will get limited assistance if the value of his home or car or material possessions is over a certain figure, as if owning a home at the age of 60 were some sort of crime. You will all acknowledge, as I do, that this is ridiculous.

Older workers are asking for no more than a little assistance that is appropriate for their situation. They are asking for a program that will help them make the transition between when they stop working and when they retire.

I can still remember an older worker who had lost his job. He took 73 resumes around over a three-month period. He was called for only two interviews, and both times the answer was no. How discouraging! I remember this man; he was destroyed, economically and mentally. He felt useless and abandoned. Today, people like him are the people for whom the Bloc Québécois is fighting to reinstate POWA.

During the 38th Parliament, the Bloc Québécois had a motion unanimously passed that called on the government to implement a strategy for helping older workers who lose their employment. Despite this motion being passed unanimously, the Liberals did not do anything either. The party in power has changed, but the results are a long time coming. In spite of its nice promises and fine speeches, the Conservative government wants to ease its conscience by talking about studies—studies that were done years ago.

The government keeps putting off implementing an effective and inexpensive program that would help these men and women who have given so much, who have paid taxes for decades, who have raised their children and who are asking for so little in return.

● (1645)

[*English*]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, how would the hon. member define an older worker? How would an older worker be determined and why? When my colleague on the committee put this forward I understood that he wanted to ensure that the intent of the motion was directed toward those who were most vulnerable, those affected by downsizing or closures, and not simply age.

Does the member not think we should be focusing more on downsizing and vulnerable workers in order to ensure we target the resources toward those who need it most? In many parts of the country there is a labour shortage. What would she consider to be the appropriate age range that would need this real income support program? I would appreciate the member's comments.

Business of Supply

•(1650)

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Speaker, I almost sensed a bit of emotion in that question, but perhaps the translator got it wrong.

They want to organize a Canada-wide activity in some of the oil-producing areas. There is no oil in my riding. However there are people losing their jobs because the previous Liberal government and the current Conservative government were inactive vis-à-vis protectionism. There was talk about bicycles, about furniture, about agriculture, about everything.

I do not think it is a good idea to send families in motorhomes to other provinces so they can survive the shortage. I think it would be better to develop their village, have them stay there and basically develop what is there. People choose to settle in a location and it is not by ignoring them and sending them elsewhere that we are going to solve the lack of training problem.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, first I would like to congratulate my colleague for her speech.

I will use the question of my Conservative colleague, the parliamentary secretary, to ask another question. She asks what would define an older worker eligible for income support.

Of course, it is someone of at least 55 years of age who has worked for the same company over 10 of the last 30 years. This is in order to allow a greater number of women to be eligible for this program, since we all know that women entering the labour market leave it on occasion. At last, this person will remain available for work. So, this is the profile of older workers eligible for this program.

I will add that I had the opportunity to travel to my colleague's riding, where we visited plants, and even plants in neighbouring ridings, including textile plants in Magog — to name only those. Based on the characteristics or criteria I just listed, could my colleague tell me if there is still time to help people in her riding and in the neighbouring riding, who often ask for her opinion?

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Speaker, of course, there is still time to help these people.

People who lose their jobs are not lazy or afraid of work; they are victims of their jobs in the textile sector. These people have worked all their lives, they have worked 40 years and it is unacceptable to ask them to lose everything they worked for all their lives, be it their assets or their house. They only need temporary relief until they find a second or third job, but we absolutely must help them. They are very important socially and from an environmental and economic stand point. If we do not help them, they could slip into utter poverty and that is unacceptable for any human being in Quebec or in Canada.

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Compton—Stanstead for agreeing to share her time with me. It was very important to me that I speak on this motion introduced by my colleague from Chambly—Borduas. He does remarkable work and I would like to pay tribute to him in this House on this file that should concern all members who represent their people. In fact, I was listening to my colleague, the member for Compton—Stanstead,

who gave a thoughtful speech that is totally in line with what the Bloc Québécois has been thinking for years.

I do not understand that some speeches from the members of the Conservative government are completely the opposite of what they were saying when they were in opposition. So, there is a serious problem of consistency between what the Conservative Party was saying when it was in opposition and what it says now that it is in power. What I also find funny is that the Conservatives have a slogan saying that it is a new government. This is an old marketing scheme used by food stores and shopping centres that label their products “new and improved”. However, in the case of the Conservatives, it is not “and improved”, unfortunately.

They call themselves “new”, like the old marketing trick, but that is only to lead us to believe that they are different from their Liberal predecessors. In this specific case, they are not different at all. They are waiting for studies, checking things out. They were in favour before, but now they are not so sure. Actually, considering the speeches we heard in the House today, it seems they are now totally opposed.

I would like someone to explain to me what happened between the time when that party was the official opposition and the time it came into power and why the government is turning its back so cowardly on the older workers who need help the most?

Allow me to reiterate to the House our position regarding the motion, which states:

That the House reiterate to the government the importance of implementing a real income support program for older workers that would apply to all older workers in all economic sectors, in all regions.

In each of our ridings, older workers face tough situations when plants close because of globalization. I cannot fathom how we can tell the people who come in our riding offices that we do not agree with this motion.

I would like to provide a brief explanation of the former POWA, the program for older worker adjustment, which ran from 1988 to 1997 and was abolished by the Liberals, as we mentioned a little earlier in this House. The former finance minister simply decided to drop workers and older workers.

From 1993 to 1996, I was an assistant to a Bloc Québécois MP. In my riding, lots of people with specific needs came to our office asking for help after massive closures, business closures. Those people were unhappy then, just as people are unhappy now.

Business of Supply

At the time, those workers could take advantage of an assistance program that was designed specifically to help them and, as I was saying earlier during questions and comments, was the exception to the rule. We should keep that in mind when talking about this kind of program. These people were not asking for handouts then, and they are not asking for handouts now. They are just asking for help getting through the transition from losing their jobs and having problems finding something else, to the moment when they can retire without having depleted all of their resources.

A Conservative member said earlier in this House that when someone loses a job, there may be a long period of unemployment and the person must find another job. Fine. But when someone does not find another job, what happens once EI benefits run out? In Quebec, it means going on welfare. To be entitled to welfare, you may not own a house, a car, RRSPs, and so on. You must therefore use up a large part of what you own in order to qualify for welfare. When you are approaching retirement, it is a fine thing to find yourself in that position, emptying your pockets, when you know very well that this kind of program does not cost much and can help a particular category of people.

At that time, workers aged 55 to 64 who were eligible because they had lost their jobs as a result of a major and permanent layoff were offered benefit payments. How did this work? As I have described, a bridge was put in place between employment insurance benefits—it was called unemployment insurance at the time and that was more appropriate, to my mind—and, eventually, the pension plan. As I said, this is not charity, it is an exception for workers for whom new jobs cannot be found.

Figures show that in 1996, 11,700 people received benefits under POWA, the program for older worker adjustment, following 900 closures.

• (1655)

Not everyone could decide to retire a few years early because they lost their job. That is not how it worked. There were very specific criteria. That is what we have been working on for several years. We worked together on it with the Conservative members and the NDP members. Unfortunately, today, the Conservatives have left us.

Since the program ended we have had only pilot projects. Under the Liberals, there was an incentive to return to work, among other things. Some people benefit from those measures, of course, and so much the better. I am convinced that the vast majority of people who lose their jobs want to find another one. In any event, I meet people who do. I have seen people who worked in the furniture industry, in the textile industry. At the Jeffrey mine, back home in Asbestos, people have lost their jobs, very often because of globalization, and they want to find another one. They do not come to see us to get benefits under a program because they want to retire rich at government expense. Quite the opposite.

Some people can benefit from these measures. We are quite pleased when, after taking a course, for example, they manage to find another form of employment. However, we must be aware that there is a category of workers for whom it is much more difficult to find a job very quickly.

As I was saying earlier, during the questions and comments period, some people can benefit from an income support program and work at the same time, just as it is possible when receiving employment insurance benefits. I have myself already been an employment insurance recipient. I had found a job which was not full time, but which allowed me to return to the labour market. I would declare my work hours for employment insurance purposes, which left me with less employment insurance benefits and more pay. I finally managed to find a permanent job. I was not 55 years old and I was able to find another form of employment. However, it is not as easy for some other people, and I think that we must be aware of that.

Under the Conservatives—my colleague from Compton—Stanstead touched up on the subject earlier—we are talking about a short-lived and restrictive support program which in no way meets the needs of older workers, since it excludes many sectors and many regions. A real program is called for not only by the Bloc Québécois, but also unanimously by the Quebec National Assembly. Earlier, my colleague from Chambly—Borduas spoke about what was done by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. This committee approved the implementation of a program for all sectors and all regions. We are not asking for a discriminatory measure such as the one mentioned by the government.

Once again, it is the Bloc Québécois that has championed the rights of the most vulnerable in this House. The income support program for older workers was proposed by my colleague from Chambly—Borduas. As I said at the beginning, he has been working tirelessly so that people in terrible straits will at last have the benefits they deserve.

I would remind the House that last June 9 there was a motion calling on the government to establish a strategy to help older workers who lose their jobs. This strategy would include income support measures to deal with the increasing number of factory closures associated with globalization. Before that, on April 6, the House unanimously passed the Bloc Québécois subamendment to the Speech from the Throne concerning a strategy for older workers that should include income support measures.

We have done the work and we are now asking the House to pass this motion so that we can move forward and give those older workers the right to retire with dignity.

How much would that cost? It was mentioned in this House. It would cost the federal government around \$55 million the first year and \$75 million after that. In fact, as was the case for POWA, which was in place from 1988 to 1997, it is estimated that the government should pay 70% of the bill. How much is this if it would allow workers to make it to retirement with dignity, given that we are announcing a surplus of more than \$13 billion? We are spending more than \$17 billion on armaments, and we just cut \$1 billion in programs for those most in need, women's groups, museums, literacy and the voluntary sector. I cannot believe that we are unable to put in place an income support program.

Back home, I was touched by the closure of Shermag, a furniture company, for which we talked about such an income support program.

Business of Supply

•(1700)

That is what I have been asked to defend here in this House. I repeat my request and I ask the House to support this motion.

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank and congratulate my colleague from Richmond—Arthabaska for his speech. Like many speakers from the Bloc Québécois and our critic in this area, the member for Chambly—Borduas, my colleague talked about the need for the government to implement a financial support program. I agree wholeheartedly of course.

I would like to ask my colleague, since he referred to the matter, whether there is a similar absolute necessity for the government to enhance—not eliminate—the support it gives to groups and organizations that help workers find jobs.

I understand that our motion aims to implement a financial program, but I would really like to hear what my colleague has to say on this. In my riding of Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, organizations such as Transition Plus, for people over the age of 50, get less and less support from the federal government.

Could my colleague tell us what he thinks on this very important issue?

•(1705)

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question which is a very pertinent one.

In my riding, there is an organization called Accès au travail, whose principles are identical, that is to help older workers who lost their job. As I said earlier, we try to find them new jobs but, unfortunately, that is not always possible. That is why we must have an income support program for older workers.

In this case, what is ironic are the mean cuts that have just been announced and that my colleague mentioned. I too remember seeing the Conservative finance minister happily posing with a big smile in front of a huge cheque like those we see in local newspapers when a sponsor gives money. Most of the time, it is for a good cause. In the case of the minister, all the money went to the debt payment. We are not against the payment of the debt, but we must put our priorities in good order. The priorities of the government are not those of our organizations which suffered funding cuts but which exist to help the most in need. In the case of people who want to learn new skills to find a new job I fail to understand and I find unacceptable that the government would make those cuts and refuse to create an income support program for seniors.

[English]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a couple of questions. What would the member think if we suggested that it is about displaced older workers, not just older workers? Many older workers still participate in the labour force again.

Recently, an OECD report on aging and employment policies in Canada recommended that the participation of older job seekers in employment programs be increased and that changes to programs

and services should build on lessons learned from previous programs.

How does the hon. member's motion take into account this OECD research, which recommends that unemployed older workers benefit from participation in employment programs?

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Speaker, it seems to me that we were very clear earlier on the staggering number of studies presented right here in this House on the issue of older workers who lose their jobs following a massive lay-off. These job losses are often the result of globalization.

We can come up with all sorts of studies, but I think that we in this House can understand that people who come to see us are truly experiencing very serious problems. Also, there used to be such a program, and it was effective and successful. The Liberal government decided to discontinue it, because it was not part of its priorities. Now, after the sponsorship scandal, we know what those Liberal priorities were. But helping older workers was not one of them.

We are seeing the same thing with the Conservative government. I do not know how many studies it will need. We did all the work. Even his own party agreed with us on the need for such a program. Now, they are sitting on the fence and saying that the situation needs to be reviewed again. However, they do not need any study before deciding to spend \$17.5 billion on weapons. They do not need any study when the time comes to—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): I am sorry, but the time has expired. Resuming debate with the hon. member for Sault Ste. Marie.

[English]

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, at the outset I want to thank to the member for Chambly—Borduas for bringing the motion forward, and I know that he and my colleague from Acadie—Bathurst have worked in this House for quite some years now to try to better the situation for working people across this country.

Today he brings to the House a very pertinent and relevant issue, which is the way we deal with our older workers and support them in their efforts, and the way we make sure that if they have to go back to work in order to support themselves, or perhaps to enhance a meagre pension, we look after their needs and make sure they are healthy, and, if they are out of work, that they get access to the supports and training or retraining they need to continue to contribute in the excellent way they have over their lifetimes.

I first want to say that I find it shocking and alarming that we are discussing the issues in such a way here today. The way that our economy has evolved, we are now very dependent on people who should be enjoying retirement. They are having to go back to work.

Private Members' Business

First is the fact that the economy needs them in the way it does. For the most part, they end up in low paying, dead-end jobs. Certainly that has been my experience. The fact is that we have not done anything as a society and as a government over the last number of years, when the economy has been well, to enhance the situation for our retired workers in this country.

They are the people who actually built the plants and communities that we all work in and live in now. They are the people who gave of their blood, sweat and tears, who fought in wars and came back, rolled up their sleeves and got down to work. They put those of us who are here today through school so that we could participate. They now find themselves in a situation where their pensions are not enough, neither the Canada pension nor the workplace pension that, if they were lucky enough to have one, is now beginning to pay out. It is not enough. It does not keep them in the dignified life that they should expect in a country that is as well off as Canada.

We have not found a way to make sure that absolutely everybody who works in this country has a pension above and beyond the Canada pension, a pension that will be there for them when they retire. Even with the pensions that do exist, we have not done that which needs to be done, and that is the indexing of pensions, as I have heard from so many seniors who say this needs to be done. Indexing needs to be done so that older people do not have to go back to work and be put through the grinder in the way that we have heard described here today. It needs to be done so they do not have to go on bended knee to government to look for a little help, for a little extra in order to improve their skills or whatever so they can make a few more dollars to buy a bit more food and perhaps pay the rent.

It is shameful that we have not found a way in this country to make sure that every worker has a pension that is indexed. It is probably something that we need to be looking at in the House in the future.

Also shameful are the kinds of cuts made by the previous Liberal government and which the present government partakes in as it tries to manage its financial affairs at a time when we have burgeoning surpluses in this country. Those cuts will have impacts on older workers in our country. As well, the government has cut literacy programs.

Particularly in northern Ontario in the resource based sector, we have workers who have worked for many years. They got up in the morning at five o'clock, got into the plant, made the paper or the steel or the boards that we all use to build our homes and our highways, and at the end of their career, at the age of 55 or 60, they end up having to take another job.

•(1710)

With the way the economy is evolving, a lot of those jobs now require a level of literacy that these workers were never able to pay attention to while working 24-7, some of them, to feed their kids and keep body and soul together. They now have found out that under the Conservative government those adult literacy programs are going to be cut.

These people find themselves living in homes that are sometimes a bit too big, yet they do not want to leave them because the

alternative is unacceptable. They cannot afford the rent. They cannot afford the taxes. They cannot afford to pay for the electricity and their heat in those homes. So they have to go out and get another job.

Since the early 1990s, the government has not been able to find the wherewithal to come forward with an affordable housing strategy so that those seniors, our mothers and fathers, can move into accommodation that is more appropriate to their station in life at this time. We need housing that is more affordable for them so that they then perhaps will not have to go out and get another job at the age of 60 or 70 and have to go through the rigmarole or the wringer of—

•(1715)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It being 5:15 p.m., it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings. Pursuant to order made earlier today, all questions necessary to dispose of the opposition motion are deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred until Monday, October 16, 2006, at the expiry of the time provided for government orders.

[Translation]

The hon. member for Portage—Lisgar has notified me that he will be unable to move his motion during the hour provided for the consideration of private members' business on Friday, October 6, 2006.

[English]

It has not been possible to arrange an exchange of positions in the order of precedence. Accordingly, I am directing the table officers to drop that item of business to the bottom of the order of precedence.

[Translation]

The hour provided for the consideration of private members' business shall therefore be suspended, and the House will continue with the business then before it.

[English]

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Speaker, I believe if you were to seek the consent of the House, there would be agreement to see the clock as 5:30.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

NATIONAL PEACEKEEPERS' DAY ACT

Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, Lib.) moved that Bill C-287, An Act respecting a National Peacekeepers' Day, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank my colleague, the member for West Nova, who will assist me here today.

I think it is very timely that we have a chance to debate Bill C-287 today. The notion that peacekeeping has gone by the wayside over the years as world and regional conflicts have changed is I think a notion that is worthy of debate, a notion that must be reconsidered.

Private Members' Business

However, the reason for bringing this proposal forward is that on August 9, 1974, nine Canadian peacekeepers were killed when their plane was shot down by a surface to air missile while en route between Beirut and Damascus.

As with most commemorations, it is important to have a critical and key date to commemorate such an event. The date of August 9 has been chosen as the date when, if this bill passes, each year the flag on the Peace Tower will be at half-mast.

It would be a heritage day which would allow for Canadians, who do reflect upon these things, to remember the tremendous work that Canadian peacekeepers have done in the past and to remember those in the present who are still involved in that traditional role they continue to play on our behalf, a role they conduct with great bravery, with tremendous intelligence, with tremendous ability and, at all times, with tremendous restraint.

In my few minutes, I would like to take two tracks with this proposal. On the one side, August 9 of each year would give us a chance to honour those who have kept and still keep peace on our behalf. On the other hand, I would like it to be a day, for those who think about these things—and I hope more and more people will as time goes by—when we can reflect and decide where it is we want to go as a nation with our military.

We support our troops wherever they are in the world right now, most particularly because of what is happening in Afghanistan in that difficult region. It is fair for us to always understand as much as we can the positions we put our soldiers in when we send them to represent us around the world. It is fair to ask questions while supporting our troops.

If some believe that peacekeeping is a thing of the past, I think they are wrong. If ultimately the objective of all our work as parliamentarians all around the world is indeed to have a more peaceful world, then there will always be a role for peacekeeping.

In fact, I will quote from a document put out by the United Nations, which states, "This 'traditional' United Nations peacekeeping continues". While it acknowledges that it may incorporate local police forces, even foreign police forces, NGOs, and different aspects of civil society in peacekeeping efforts, the nature of peacekeeping may have changed but the goal of peacekeeping has not changed. That goal is to allow for warring factions to build that space between them where they live together.

I will read for members these few sentences from another UN document:

Recent years have seen major changes in the number and nature of conflicts brought before the United Nations. The post-cold war period has been characterized by a proliferation of civil wars and other armed conflicts within States, threatening international peace and security....

The document goes on to explain how the nature of peacekeeping has changed, but there is no argument that peacekeeping is still an important part of the UN's role and is very important to Canada.

• (1720)

I am proud to say that a former member of Parliament from my riding, the then riding of Algoma East, Lester B. Pearson, was

instrumental in the UNs' first participation as a peacekeeping agency for the world.

I also want to mention that one of my constituents, Bob Manuel from Elliot Lake, who is an active member of the legion there, not only helped the Province of Ontario pass a motion to effect such a day as peacekeepers day in Ontario, but he is also helping me with this project. I hope my colleague from West Nova and others can convince this place that it is very appropriate that we honour past and current peacekeepers, that we recognize their bravery and that we recognize the need to understand the changing nature of peacekeeping and never give up the essence of what peacekeeping is all about. Even if it is an objective for another millennia, it is something that we must remember now.

As we remember those who fought in wars past and what is the most important motto of November 11, "Lest We Forget", by the same notion, let us not forget that there will be soldiers who will lose their lives in the future, whether it is the kind of conflict in Afghanistan, which is hardly a peacekeeping situation, or somewhere else. As the world gets better, as these regional disputes, hopefully, ameliorate over time, peacekeeping will again become the preeminent function of the world's military capacity, not the kind of thing that, sadly, we see as necessary in some parts of the world.

The fact that we even need to commemorate our peacekeepers highlights the fact that because we are, as average citizens, not in the middle of conflict, it is easy to take for granted the hard work, the sacrifice and the courage of all of our military around the world.

I had a chance to spend two weeks in Wainwright and a week in Bosnia with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry First Battalion. I had just a small sampling of military life but it gave me a chance to see a bit of what it is like to be in the military. I know members here, who have spent time with the military, know how committed our troops are. Our military understands that its role is not ever to be the aggressor. Its role is always to help provide the local capacity for education, health, sanitation, water, roads and so on.

We must not let the cloud of war take away from the appreciation that peace is ultimately what we are after and that it is peacemaking that will get us there. I am not so naive as to believe that in the near future we will get there. It is only by keeping our eye on that goal that we will get there.

We are reminded every day that this is a difficult world in which to live. We ask our soldiers, whether they are ground troops, air support or the navy, to represent us in situations that we, without being there, can never really fully understand. At the same time, we have a responsibility to understand, as much as possible, about the situations in which we send them. We owe that to them. As a Parliament and as a country, we do not want to send our troops in harm's way without there being a clear objective about what it is they are doing in relation to Canadian values. We can have this discussion all the while being in total support of our troops.

Private Members' Business

•(1725)

By way of summary, the bill has two principal objectives: first, to commemorate those who lost their lives on August 9, 1974, because they represent all Canadian peacekeepers who have lost their lives, of which there are several hundred; and second, which is in the same vein of honour and commemoration, we want to pay homage to peacekeepers around the world. Canada is not alone in this venture.

I know that the process or act of remembrance becomes larger and larger in this country as each year goes by. I am sure my colleague, the hon. member for West Nova, who has been around this place for a few years, may recognize, as I have, that the remembrance events in our ridings are getting bigger. I am sure my colleagues across the way have also seen that these events are getting bigger, not smaller. We should actually commend our legions and their auxiliaries for helping us to keep the act of remembrance alive.

At the same time, we could have a heritage day, not a holiday, which I want to underline, similar to Vimy Ridge day which we have celebrated every April over the last three years. Having such a day would remind us of the need to evaluate our role as a peacekeeping nation and the role we impose on our troops around the world. They never ask any questions, they just go. They trust us and we trust them and, therefore, we have a great responsibility to always ask the questions, all the while paying them the greatest and deepest respect.

I have had the sad opportunity to participate in ceremonies recognizing the loss of two soldiers from my own riding in the last two weeks. I can hardly imagine how difficult it would be to be a parent of a soldier who has lost his or her life. The only consolation is the love and caring parents feel from Canadians and the thought that their son or daughter gave up his or her life for their country and fellow man.

I thank the House for hearing me out and would ask for its support as this bill proceeds through further stages.

•(1730)

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary (for the Canadian Wheat Board) to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I need some clarification from my colleague on a couple of the comments he made. He seemed to be indicating early on that he wanted a day to recognize our peacekeepers but he also talked about the fact that he did not want to see them being aggressors. I assume he was talking about wanting us to play a more passive role and to recognize the passive role that they may play as peacekeepers rather than peacemakers.

The Royal Canadian Legion has come forward with a fairly strong resolution. It has defined peacekeepers in a much broader sense. It talks about a peacekeeper as being the definition of a veteran, which encompasses our traditional war veterans, cold war veterans, UN peacekeeping veterans, Gulf War veterans and all serving military personnel.

I would like the member to confirm that he is indeed talking about all soldiers, many who are not able to be passive in their role as peacemakers but also had to perform an aggressive role at times. I want to confirm that he is talking about all of our Canadian troops and not limiting it to just certain groups.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Mr. Speaker, I deliberately did not define peacekeeper in the bill because I prefer an expansive definition of peacekeeper. I do appreciate that, in certain roles, peacekeepers have to use force.

Maybe the member misunderstood me. An aggressor is the one making war. I certainly support, when necessary, the ability of our peacekeepers to use force, but one does not need to be an aggressor to use force in keeping peace, making peace or fulfilling the mandate that military authorities have provided.

I would agree with the legion's resolution. I have not seen the wording and I would ask the member to supply me with a copy. However, I have no disagreement with the intent of the legion that peacekeepers should be as expansive as is appropriate.

Peacekeeping started with this country, with one of our prime ministers working with the UN. There are situations where one can make a distinction about peacekeeping. For example, would we call the conflict in Afghanistan a peacekeeping mission? I do not know. I deliberately did not put a definition in there so that it could be expansive and it could meet the needs of all those interested in promoting Canada's role as a peace broker in the world.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first, I want to commend my colleague's long service to the veterans affairs committee and really to the veterans in this country. I know he has brought forward private members' legislation in the past and I want to commend him for Vimy Ridge day which he put forward in 2000.

I certainly recognize the contribution that our peacekeepers have performed for this country and, indeed, the global neighbourhood. Our peacekeepers have established themselves as some of the best in the world and therefore our peacekeepers are held in high esteem by all nations of the world. This recognition is due and it is important.

As more of a comment, when this legislation comes forward, I want the member to know that I will be standing to support it. I want to thank him for bringing this forward to the House.

•(1735)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking has 20 seconds.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Mr. Speaker, that is just enough time to thank this member and others whose sentiments are the same on this, that we must keep our eye on the ball. If the ultimate goal of all those in leadership is more peace in the world, then what Canada has done in the past and what it will do in the future when it comes to peacekeeping is essential.

I agree with him that Canada's military has an exemplary reputation around the world.

Private Members' Business

Mrs. Betty Hinton (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me begin by commending the hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing for his desire to recognize the tens of thousands of Canadian men and women who have served our country and the cause of peace with such dedication and distinction.

As Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, I can assure all members of the House that this government, more than any other in recent history, is committed to giving every possible support to serving members of the Canadian Forces and to ensuring that our honoured veterans are treated with the dignity and respect they have earned from a grateful nation. They have brought honour to Canada and we will honour them.

Therefore, I am pleased to rise and speak in support of the proposed legislation at first reading.

Since 1919, Canadians from coast to coast to coast have paused each year on November 11 to remember their brave countrymen and women who have given their all in the service of Canada. In this remembrance we remember and honour all veterans. We honour those who served in war and those who served in peace. We honour those who served in France, in Italy, in Hong Kong, in Belgium, in Korea, in the Middle East and in the Balkans. We honour those who have served in Canada helping our communities respond to and recover from natural disaster. We honour those who continue to stand for peace and freedom today in Afghanistan.

We have made no distinction in our remembrance because all who have served in the past and all who serve today have made no distinction. Their commitment to honour Canada was the same, no matter where they served, when they served or under what conditions they served. Our commitment to honour them must be the same.

At the same time, the veterans of Canada's peacekeeping missions have earned special recognition. The concept of peacekeeping was a Canadian invention. It brought our country one Nobel Prize for Peace and a share of a second when the United Nations peacekeepers were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1988.

Our peacekeepers, all peacekeepers in fact, continue to be recognized internationally on the International Day of the United Nations Peacekeepers. This day is marked in countries around the world, including Canada, each May 29. Canada also joins nations around the world in commemorating United Nations Day on October 24 each year.

Our peacekeepers are recognized by the world and they are recognized by Canada. Their contribution is celebrated and commemorated in a very prominent way not far from this very building. "Reconciliation", the peacekeeping monument, stands in the centre of one of the busiest intersections in the national capital. It is, I believe, still the only monument of its kind in the world.

Our peacekeepers are also recognized by the Canadian Peacekeeping Service Medal. This award which depicts the peacekeeping monument on its obverse was created in 1997. The Peacekeeping Service Medal honours Canadians, primarily members of the Canadian Forces, and members of the Canadian police services who have served on international peacekeeping missions.

The peacekeeping service medal is in keeping with Canada's traditional expressions of honour to members of the forces for their service. It follows in a long line of such decorations from the Atlantic Star and the Korean Medal to the Dieppe Bar and the Gulf and Kuwait Medal. Tens of thousands of veterans of Canada's peacekeeping missions wear this medal with pride. It is treasured by the families of those brave Canadians who have made the supreme sacrifice in the cause of peace.

The Peacekeeping Monument and the Peacekeeping Medal recognize the special honour our peacekeepers have brought to Canada and the often very difficult and dangerous circumstances in which they have served. On many deployments there has been very little peace to keep. On others their task could perhaps be best described as peacemaking rather than peacekeeping.

We know the risks are all too real. As stated in the preamble to the bill, more than 150 Canadians have given their lives on peacekeeping missions. These missions can be exceptionally difficult and stressful. Time after time and mission after mission, Canada's peacekeepers have demonstrated exceptional discipline and professionalism.

● (1740)

It is not just the physical risk. Our peacekeepers have too often seen examples of man's inhumanity to man that defy imagination. The emotional wounds can be every bit as debilitating as a bullet or a bomb. I am proud to say Veterans Affairs Canada is a world leader in providing the special support and services that are keeping our veterans and helping them to recover from those wounds.

I began my remarks by talking about November 11, Remembrance Day. It is our national day of remembrance for all those who have served, and its meaning will never change. The bill proposes August 9 as a national peacekeepers' day, the day being chosen as it was the day nine Canadian peacekeepers lost their lives when their aircraft was shot down over Syria in 1974. We must never allow the great meaning and significance of November 11, Remembrance Day, to be lost, as more and more days are added to recognize specific groups involved in peacekeeping.

Further discussion on a specific day for peacekeepers, as is indicated in the bill from the member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, or a day of recognizing peacekeepers, as is noted in the resolution by the Royal Canadian Legion this past June, is warranted. It is warranted because the government respects the views of Canadians on either side of the issue. We know there are those who strongly support a day a recognition for peacekeeping or peacekeepers, and we know there are those who never want to see the significance of remembrance on November 11 diminished.

We want Canadians to have an opportunity to decide. By having this discussion, through the parliamentary process, they will be given that opportunity. We are debating it here in the House and it will be debated at the committee level should the bill proceed further.

Private Members' Business

Again, I commend the hon. member for bringing the legislation forward. There were a couple of comments made that have me slightly concerned, but I am certain that, in his heart, the member opposite recognizes that peacekeeping missions are not safe missions. Peacekeeping missions are every bit as dangerous as peacemaking missions.

I have the great fortune of having in my riding some unsung heroes who have served this country very well. They were peacekeepers. Some of them were RCMP members. There have been many cases where these people have been put in situations that would be very difficult for even the longest serving soldier to experience without any ramifications. I honour those men and women who have done this service for our country and who have kept the tradition of Canada alive. Those are the kinds of people who make us what we are as a nation. Whether they be peacemakers or peacekeepers, we need in our hearts to hold what they have given us and that we take for granted very dear.

The people of Afghanistan are currently in a position where they may yet understand what it is that every day Canadians take for granted. We will give that as a gift from Canada to Afghanistan: freedom, peace, the right to religion and the right to an education. Those are all things we should mark.

Once again, I thank the opposite member for bringing this forward, and I am thankful for the opportunity to speak to this very important issue.

• (1745)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I rise this evening to speak to a bill introduced by a colleague of mine both in the House and at the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, the hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing.

From the outset, I want to say that the Bloc Québécois supports this bill in principle. Bill C-287 likely stems from the campaign conducted by the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping to perpetuate the memories and deeds of fallen comrades who lost their lives in defence of peace and freedom.

Indeed, since 1945, more than 100,000 Canadians have worn the blue beret, and 114 Canadians peacekeepers have died while taking part in peacekeeping and observation missions. That represents 5% of the price paid by peacekeepers from every nation, given that 2,298 have made the ultimate sacrifice.

Why pay tribute to our peacekeepers, one might ask? I will list a few reasons.

First, they are a key component of multilateralism, a conflict resolution principle very dear to the hearts of Quebeckers. UN peacekeeping missions represent an impartial and very widely accepted way to share the burden and act effectively.

Second, they are active around the world. The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations—also known as DPKO—is currently running 18 operations on 4 continents and in 10 time zones. It employs over 90,000 people and directly influences the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world. The operations are made up of military personnel, military observers, and police

personnel. DPKO operations also employ nearly 5,250 international civilian personnel, over 11,300 local civilian personnel and approximately 1,720 United Nations volunteers from 108 countries that supply military and police personnel to United Nations peacekeeping operations.

Third, their missions are usually effective. Since 1945, United Nations peacekeeping forces have conducted 60 peacekeeping missions on the ground and have negotiated 172 peace settlements that ended regional conflicts and enabled the populations of more than 45 countries to participate in free and fair elections.

In addition to peacekeeping and security, the peacekeeping forces have, with increasing frequency, been responsible for supporting political processes, building legal systems, creating law enforcement and police forces, and disarming former combatants.

Fourth, peacekeeping missions offer good value for money.

• (1750)

A study conducted by Oxford University economists found that international military intervention, coordinated under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, was the most effective way to minimize conflicts. The official budget for the DPKO for July 1, 2005, to June 30, 2006, was roughly \$5 billion, or 0.5% of the world's military expenses.

This raises the question: why August 9? It was on August 9, 1974, that Canadian peacekeepers suffered the most casualties in a single day. Nine peacekeepers perished when their white plane bearing the United Nations insignia crashed on a routine flight from Beirut to Damascus. Captain Gerry Foster, the pilot of the plane, managed to avoid the first missile, but was unable to avoid the other two.

Why not choose May 29, since that was the date chosen by the United Nations to celebrate International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers? It is an international day celebrated on May 29 by all nations that take part in peacekeeping missions. Indeed, May 29 commemorates Security Council Resolution 50 on the creation of the first United Nations peacekeeping operation in 1948.

We could choose July 28 in memory of the most recent peacekeeper, Colonel Hess-von Kruedener, who was killed during an attack between Lebanon and Israel.

Keep in mind that peacekeepers are sent mainly for missions of peace, to maintain peace. These missions became increasingly popular in 1956 after a UN resolution was tabled by a colleague dear to all Liberals here, Lester B. Pearson. This resolution earned him the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize. Let us pay tribute to Mr. Pearson for his dedication to peace.

In closing, I want to confirm that the Bloc Québécois is in favour of this motion in principle.

Ms. Denise Savoie (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to speak on this bill.

I will begin my comments by reminding the House of the inscription on the monument in honour of our peacekeepers in Ottawa: "Peacekeeping". It is very short, but it says it all. This is how Canada's reputation as a peaceful country was built.

Private Members' Business

Canada's first peacekeeping mission, even before the implementation of the UN official system, occurred in 1948 in Kashmir.

Canada then took part in each of the UN peacekeeping initiatives until 1989. Over 125,000 Canadian men and women have been deployed on about 50 peacekeeping missions led by the United Nations since 1949. About 116 of them—and now several others—gave their lives to bring peace to the world.

I spent several years working with the military. Engraved in my memory is the face and the courage of each person I worked with: the rescue technician who had to jump in rough seas to pull fishermen out of the water, the young sergeant who had to leave his family to serve in Kosovo, the naval technician who was gone for months at a time on patrol in the Pacific, and many others. I always saw the same loyalty and willingness to answer the call of duty.

We cannot stress enough the importance of the work of those who serve in the armed forces, who put themselves in harm's way for Canada. There is no word to describe the magnitude of their sacrifice, nor my feeling of gratitude—which all Canadians also share, I believe—for the men and women who are ready to give their lives for a better world.

I am using my time tonight to support the bill to establish a national peacekeepers' day. I believe that it is an excellent idea to have, in addition to Remembrance Day, a day to honour Canadians who risked and sometimes even gave their lives in the quest for a durable peace, so fundamental for human beings.

The peacekeeping memorial in Ottawa reminds us of the sacrifice of Canadian peacekeepers and leaves us with an undying memory of the contribution these great Canadians made to peace and to the pride we feel about being a peaceful nation.

•(1755)

[*English*]

That sense of pride is strong and it is justified, but it must not be complacent. The Conservative government has lost its way in the pursuit of peace. It has been too quick to resort to a seek and destroy mission in southern Afghanistan and too stubborn to correct our course when our actions are working instead to the detriment of peace.

Since 1995, Canadian direct participation in UN peacekeeping efforts has greatly declined. In July 2006, Canada ranked 51st on the list of UN peacekeepers, contributing 130 peacekeepers out of a total UN deployment of over 70,000.

[*Translation*]

Since the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, Canada has spent more than \$4 billion on military operations in Afghanistan.

During the same period, Canada's military involvement in UN-led missions has cost a total of \$215 million, the equivalent of 3% of its spending on international military operations. I would draw my colleagues' attention to the difference between \$4 billion and \$215 million.

While only 59 Canadian soldiers are taking part in UN missions around the world, approximately 2,300 are on duty in southern Afghanistan.

Having previously ranked among the top 10, Canada now ranks fiftieth among the 95 countries providing military personnel for UN missions.

[*English*]

Some people wonder if peacekeeping is still an appropriate tool to confront modern conflict. The tragedy that is unfolding in Darfur is an example of the role peacekeeping can and should play by placing a force in the middle to protect a vulnerable civilian population and combat those who would attack them.

Nearly all lasting solutions to modern day wars have come through negotiated peace settlements and with the help of middlemen to create a space between warring factions and assist them in keeping the peace. Just as the nature of peacekeeping has changed since the days of Lester Pearson, so too has the nature of armed conflict. Today's protracted civil conflicts require conflict resolution strategies that include tangible negotiated peace processes.

Civil conflicts in Angola, Sierra Leone, El Salvador and Northern Ireland have required many years and several failed peace agreements to isolate legitimate political issues and actors from illegitimate criminal ones. A viable peace alternative, not just building schools, but engaging in peace negotiation wins the hearts and minds of everyone toward peace by offering hope. Those who would violate that process are rightly identified as illegitimate actors in the peace process isolated from the majority who seek peace and then rooted out militarily.

•(1800)

[*Translation*]

I have no illusions about the danger inherent in peacekeeping missions. I know that despite its proud peacekeeping tradition, Canada must adapt to the reality of modern conflict, but I also know that we must not follow the American example and rush headlong into a senseless conflict. We have to understand how modern conflict works and how to reach a fair and lasting solution. To that end, we have to be staunch defenders and advocates of peace and never hesitate to take the side of peace, but we must also remain impartial, understand the grievances of the parties involved in the conflict and advocate a peaceful resolution, isolate the parties with no right to intervene and, once all these conditions are in place, be prepared to use military means to achieve peace.

I believe in peace, and I also believe that in certain extraordinary circumstances, it might be necessary to fight for peace. However, I am firmly convinced that there are many methods besides force to achieve peace.

I do not think we are exploring all the other peaceful solutions as much as we should, but I do know that every time fighting has been necessary, the men and women of our Canadian Forces have always answered their government's call.

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to second the bill introduced by the member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking.

Private Members' Business

We know that he had the support of the hon. member for Sudbury last week and that the bill should have come up for second reading at that time. However, the hon. member had to go back to his riding to be at the funeral service of two soldiers who had fallen in the line of duty in Afghanistan. Our colleague made the right choice and went to the funerals with the families in his riding.

I thank the member for Sudbury who exchanged turns with the hon. member last week. Thus, the House can proceed to the study of the bill.

I am very happy to see all political parties support the bill and support our troops since the bill aims at designating a National Peacekeepers' Day.

Sometimes, we may have a rather romantic vision of peacekeepers' life because we think they spend their time on the front line, in a big space between two armies five to ten kilometres apart where they can take walks and are never fired at. As I will show later in my speech, I must say that that has not always been the case.

I spoke with Mr. Herb Boudreau, a retired soldier who was in Cyprus, I believe, where he was involved in some very difficult situations. He often found himself in these frightening situations.

I will not list all of the reasons that prompt us to support the resolution. I believe the members have already done a good job. I would like to point out a few facts, however.

•(1805)

[*English*]

On August 9, 1974 nine Canadian peacekeepers serving with the United Nations emergency force in Egypt and Israel were shot down by a Syrian air defence missile while preparing to land at Damascus, Syria on a regular re-supply mission. This represented the greatest single loss of Canadian life on a single peacekeeping mission and that is why the date is selected in this bill.

In recognizing the nine fallen peacekeepers, we pay tribute to the lives of over 100 Canadian peacekeepers who have been killed serving the international community in this capacity.

Peacekeeping is a dynamic concept that responds to changes in the international environment in order to create security for those affected by conflict. Traditionally, peacekeeping took place between two states in order to monitor a peace treaty upon which all parties had agreed. These early missions were traditionally military in nature.

The role of peacekeeping has expanded to include the delivery of humanitarian aid, supervision of elections, repatriation of refugees, disarming of warring factions, and the clearing of landmines.

Another increasingly important aspect of peacekeeping is support for stable government and human rights, including the organization of electoral systems and the training of police forces and the judiciary.

Canada peace support efforts now include the RCMP and its provincial and municipal policing partners, Elections Canada and Correctional Service Canada. Civilian experts involved in peace support operations include: regional and municipal administrations, judges, prosecutors, the media, health, tax and social policy advisors,

child protection experts, facilitators and mediators, and people who manage basic infrastructure such as sewage treatment plants and railways.

It can be argued that the major threat to the international community is no longer from nation states disputing territory or trying to keep the balance of power. Rather, we are confronted by a spectrum of armed groups representing different value systems that seek power and influence.

While these groups may, in some cases, be funded by nation states, they also have access to private and commercial sources of funding. They are not signatories to the legal conventions we have relied on. They make no distinctions between civilians and combatants. Terror is their preferred weapon and they rarely engage in open combat. These non-state actors are media savvy and use the Internet skilfully to convey their messages.

The result is a blurring of lines, both in reality and in our understanding. In Afghanistan and elsewhere, activities within a city of thousands or millions in conflict become a dynamic and complex mosaic of combat, stability and security, and humanitarians operations.

There is no indication that conflict will return to the rather neat and tidy affairs of the past governed by agreed to protocols and rules. Changes in conflict and its methods compel us to think about how we respond to and manage conflict.

We need public and informed debate about the respective roles of military and humanitarians, and to determine how both can function effectively in a rapidly changing international environment. It is a conversation that needs to include all Canadians.

Next month marks the 50th anniversary of the day that Lester B. Pearson, secretary of state for external affairs and later prime minister, proposed a resolution for the development of an international peace force to Suez under the United Nations. Lester B. Pearson stated:

We need action not only to end the fighting but to make the peace...My own government would be glad to recommend Canadian participation in such a United Nations force, a truly international peace and police force.

Even at that time there was a blurring of lines between the blue beret and the steel helmet.

Pearson believed that Canada had a responsibility and a vital interest in creating peace and security in countries ravaged by war. He was awarded the Nobel peace prize, as we heard, in 1957.

Today, more than 100,000 individuals from more than 100 countries are engaged in more than 30 peace operations around the world.

Private Members' Business

•(1810)

I would like to talk a bit about the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre because I share Lester B. Pearson with the member who is sponsoring this bill. Mr. Pearson was from his riding, but his heritage was in my riding also.

Over the past 50 years, Canada has cultivated a formidable reputation for excellence in peacekeeping. Within that reputation, the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre is recognized as a leader in multi-disciplinary peace operations research, education and training. Since its inception, the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre has trained over 6,100 people from 147 countries, including courses delivered in over 30 countries in English, French and Spanish.

A not for profit and non-governmental organization, the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre was established in 1994 by the Government of Canada and works in partnership with a range of domestic and international governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Reflecting the reality of working in a complex mission and field environment, the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre faculty and participants come from a variety of civilian, military and police backgrounds. Applying problem-based learning and adult learning techniques, the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre is renowned for the quality and diversity of its courses for civilian, police and military participants.

Research ensures that the centre's training materials are relevant and up to date, and its close working relationship with funder agencies and partners ensure that the centre's learning materials offer a balance of relevant theory and practice.

Peacekeeping, and the environment in which it is conducted, has evolved significantly since the first peacekeeping mission some 50 years ago. In this changing environment, the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre's contribution to preparing military, police and civilians to develop and deliver effective peace operations worldwide is more important than ever.

[*Translation*]

In closing, I am very pleased to support the hon. member who is sponsoring this bill intended to increase awareness among Canadians about our peacekeepers and to teach them more about the multitudes of situations they face. It is not always easy. Sometimes, we must make the peace that we would rather be keeping.

In order to have infrastructures, sacrifices must be made and courage is needed. For this reason, people from across the country—like those of the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre—group together the officers and all sectors of our society, governments at all levels, in order to meet the requirements and expectations of all countries concerning Canada.

[*English*]

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, like the hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapus-kasing, like all members of this House, and like all Canadians I hold thousands of Canadian men and women who serve both Canada and the world in the cause of peace in the highest esteem.

Consequently, I will be joining the member in supporting our peacekeepers by voting in favour of Bill C-287, so that it can move on to committee.

I will confess that I considered for some time whether the declaration of a national day was the appropriate means to express our respect and endless gratitude for the sacrifice of these brave and dedicated men and women.

My concern was that such a declaration might somehow take away from Canada's long tradition of remembrance. We have for almost 90 years set aside November 11 as our national day of thanks to the more than 116,000 Canadians and Newfoundlanders who have given their lives in defence of our freedom. Even before Confederation, Newfoundlanders were committed to democracy as they are now.

We honour and thank them all on that day because we do not wish to distinguish the sacrifice of one from another. We cannot make that distinction because it does not exist. Each one made the ultimate sacrifice and there is none greater. The recognition of that simple profound fact, that one can do no more than to give one's life for one's country, is the very essence of our remembrance.

It is true however as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs has pointed out, that for a great many Canadians, probably a majority of Canadians, Remembrance Day stirs particularly fond memories. We think of the horrors of the trenches of the first world war, the great battles of the second world war, and the bitter fighting in Korea. These powerful memories make all the more powerful the tremendous place these great conflicts occupy in world history.

It is for this reason that the excellent education and awareness programs offered by Veterans Affairs Canada include special modules designed to increase the understanding by Canadians of the significant contribution that Canada's peacekeepers have made and, in fact, continue to do today.

Canada's new Veterans Charter is founded on that same belief. It recognizes that today's veterans have earned the same high standard of service from Canada that their parents and grandparents earned. The new Veterans Charter recognizes that every member of the forces, no matter where or when they wear the uniform, are accepting the same risk.

They know that at any time they may be asked to put their lives and their futures on the line, in peacekeeping, peacemaking or combat services, or in times of emergency at home. There is no question that the risks and stresses may differ from one mission to another. Our peacekeepers must deal with unpredictable situations, where it may be difficult to know who is a friend and who is an enemy.

We recognize that on one of the days that we set aside we pay homage to all those who have died in the service of our country, but the question is, is it enough?

Our peacekeepers are honoured each year on the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers in May. Are Canada's peacekeepers like the prophets without sufficient honour in their own land? The question is—

Adjournment Proceedings

•(1815)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Order, please. The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

The hon. member for Lambton—Kent—Middlesex will have six minutes when Bill C-287 is taken up again.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*English*]

FIREARMS REGISTRY

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Firearms Centre reports that 85% of spousal homicides occur in private homes, and a shocking 71% of the firearms used in spousal homicides are in fact long guns. In light of these horrifying statistics, I asked the public safety minister last June why the Conservative government was planning to remove all long guns from the firearms registry.

Since then, we witnessed the tragic events of September 13, when Kimveer Gill went on a rampage at Dawson College in Montreal. At the end of the day, 18-year-old Anastasia De Sousa was dead and 20 other people suffered severe injuries. Furthermore, the lives of all students and staff at Dawson College changed forever.

Kimveer Gill was armed with a nine millimetre Beretta Cx4 Storm carbine, a rifle classified as a semi-automatic weapon, or in simpler terms, a long gun. He also carried a .45 calibre handgun and a shotgun.

While it is true that all of these weapons were acquired by Gill according to the rules, Canadians are asking why are the Conservatives walking in the opposite direction to public opinion and why are they planning to deregister all long guns?

The intelligent thing to do would be to add all semi-automatic rifles and handguns to the prohibited list. Instead, the Conservatives are turning a blind eye and are planning to deregister an estimated seven million rifles in Canada. Seven million rifles. That is seven million more firearms that will be easier for people like Kimveer Gill to obtain. It is a disgrace. It is a national disgrace.

The Prime Minister claims that the firearms registry failed to prevent this tragedy. This is not true. The obvious solution is to tighten the rules, add other categories of long guns to the registry and make tougher legislation to prevent people like Kimveer Gill from obtaining these particular weapons in the first place.

I know my hon. friend on the government side of the House will try to make some sort of argument that the firearms registry does not work and that it is too costly and bureaucratic. That is not true. In terms of cost, the real question is, how much value does one place on human life?

In terms of working, in the days that followed the shootings at Dawson College, Quebec police launched an investigation into a 14-year-old boy who posted death threats on the very same website that Kimveer Gill used. Police checked the gun registry, discovered that his father had firearms in the house and the guns were quickly removed. This is how frontline police officers use the firearms registry as a tool to protect Canadians from similar tragedies.

Statistics clearly show that the number of firearms homicides dropped significantly in Canada since the gun registry was put in place in 1995. Therefore, I would like to ask the members opposite to tell the House why the Conservatives are making it easier for criminals to obtain seven million long guns, and how will the availability of these dangerous weapons protect Canadians?

Further, I would like to know if the Conservatives plan to ban the type of weapon that Kimveer Gill used to kill Anastasia De Sousa. I would also like to know if the members would be willing to meet with the students and staff of Dawson College and explain to them how their new policy will make Canada a safer place in which to live.

•(1820)

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for Don Valley East for giving me the opportunity to rise in the House today and answer her questions. The question put forward concerns the firearms program.

I would like to give her and Canadians some statistics from the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, which are quite interesting. In actual fact, there are 6,455,026 registered long guns in the country. Those are already owned by Canadians. Total homicides with long guns known to be registered in 2003, the first year the gun registry was fully operational, were two. The vast majority of homicides in Canada are committed with non-registered, illegal handguns.

In her question, the hon. member references the use of long guns in spousal homicides. This government sees any incident of spousal homicide as a tragic loss, and we place the highest priority on the prevention of domestic abuse.

According to Statistics Canada's "Family Violence in Canada, a Statistical Profile, 2004", the use of long guns has decreased notably over the last 30 years, while the use of handguns is increasing. No reliable statistics demonstrate the decreases in long gun homicides are associated with the long gun registry. In fact, these trends began long before registration became mandatory in 2003.

In 2003, the first year that the long gun registry was fully operational, only 2 of 161 firearms-related homicides were committed with long guns known to be registered, despite the fact that there are nearly 6.5 million legal non-restricted long guns in Canada.

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Regrettably, illegal handguns are the preferred weapon of choice for criminals. Again, in 2003, 101 of 161 homicides in Canada were committed with illegal non-registered handguns or with handguns that were simply not recovered. The increase in the use of handguns demonstrates the need to ensure that those who should not have access to guns do not obtain them, rather than wasting valuable resources on processes that only serve to burden law-abiding Canadians with unnecessary paperwork.

More than half of those accused of domestic homicide between 1997 and 2003 had histories of criminal violence. Seventeen per cent of male accused were suspected of suffering from a mental disorder. These individuals, clearly, should not be in possession of firearms. The government will be moving forward shortly with a series of additional measures designed to strengthen our licensing system. This is where we must focus our efforts. Instead of wasting resources on the failed effort to count and track every hunting rifle and shotgun in the country, we will focus those resources on effective front end screening and on keeping guns out of the hands of those who should not possess them.

Under the proposed changes to the Firearms Act, Canadians will still have to have a valid firearms license, will still be required to go through police background checks, and will require safety training in order to acquire or possess firearms and to acquire ammunition. The handgun registry will remain, as will the ban on all prohibited firearms. Gun owners will be required to continue to obey regulations concerning the safe storage and transport of firearms. All transactions involving firearms will be verified and recorded, ensuring that those purchasing firearms have a valid licence and preventing those with histories of criminal violence or mental disorder from purchasing firearms.

We made a promise to Canadians during the election and we are delivering on that promise. Although there has been some opposition, the resounding feedback from Canadians that we have received is in favour of our approach. We believe there are more effective ways to fight gun crime than the registration of long guns.

• (1825)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Speaker, one of the first targets of Kimveer Gill at Dawson College was 18 year old Hayder Kadhim. Mr. Kadhim was shot in the head, in the neck and in one of his legs. Fortunately, Mr. Kadhim survived and is now slowly recovering.

This young man has made a simple request. Mr. Kadhim would like to meet with the Prime Minister and debate the Conservative plan to eliminate the gun registry and make it easier to obtain long guns. So far the Prime Minister has refused to meet Mr. Kadhim. What is the Prime Minister afraid of?

Will the hon. member stand in the House tonight and promise to at least ask the Prime Minister to grant Mr. Kadhim's request for a meeting?

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Mr. Speaker, this Government of Canada is committed to effective firearms control that targets criminals while maintaining the highest standards of public safety. There is no reliable evidence indicating that registration has reduced crime committed with long guns.

According to the Auditor General, data in the firearms registry is often unreliable. Paragraph 4.61 of the Auditor General's report from this past May notes that at least 9% to 12% of firearm registration certificates contained inaccurate information. This limits the reliability of the registry for police.

Supporters of the registry often claim that the police use the registry 6,700 times a day, but this is somewhat misleading. Whenever police officers in certain jurisdictions access the Canadian Police Information Centre, CPIC, for any reason, such as a simple address check, an automatic hit is generated with the Canadian Firearms Registry On-line, whether the information is desired or not. This is the case, for example, with the Toronto police services, the Vancouver police services and the B.C. RCMP, which accounts for nearly 12,000 police officers.

In 2006 the Auditor General estimated the registry has now cost over \$1 billion. Two Library of Parliament studies further estimate that the enforcement and compliance costs are substantial, running into hundreds of millions of dollars.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:28 p.m.)

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