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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

CONTENTS

(Table of Contents appears at back of this issue.)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

The House met at 2 p.m.

Prayers

• (1405)

[English]

The Speaker: It being Wednesday, we will now have the singing of the national anthem led by the hon. member for Mississauga South.

[Members sang the national anthem]

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

JOSEPH NEIL TILLEY

Mr. Fabian Manning (Avalon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on January 26 our province was saddened to hear of the passing of Joseph Neil Tilley.

Neil graduated from Memorial University with a degree in anthropology. While at MUN, he served as president of the students' union. Following his graduation, he worked with the university extension services, which deployed staff in rural areas of Newfoundland to assist communities in self-improvement initiatives.

He travelled extensively throughout the province and many parts of the world to bring his expertise on self-betterment to others less fortunate. Neil also acquired a master's degree in community development and planned to get his doctorate, but became ill before this could be accomplished.

When Neil's work brought him back home to Kelligrews, he reactivated his farm operation and practised organic farming. He acquired the skills and training needed to teach these farming methods to others.

Neil was always interested in the environment and, with others, founded the Kelligrews Ecological Enhancement Program, KEEP, whose mandate in part is to conserve, preserve and enhance.

Neil was a very spiritual man, a man of faith that has never wavered. He was a good man who died too young. His years on earth were filled with accomplishments that most of us can only dream of.

Our deepest sympathies go out to his family and friends.

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FATHER LOUIS QUINN

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour of rising today to inform the House of a spectacular scene that recently unfolded in the Dominican Republic. A funeral procession for a simple man, in a simple casket, was joined spontaneously by more than 5,000 locals pouring down the hills from a picturesque Dominican town.

They paid their respects to a man who taught for 60 years and who comforted and inspired Dominicans in all corners of their island nation. They honoured a man who led initiatives that saw 600 kilometres of roads paved, 2,000 homes built, 69 schools constructed, 11 medical clinics created, and the construction of 13 community centres.

That man was Father Louis Quinn. He was a man of God, a missionary, an incredible champion for the Dominican people, and he was a Canadian. Born in Toronto, Father Quinn brought love, selflessness and advocacy to distant Caribbean shores. It was said by the Dominican president that his nation would never forget Father Quinn.

I hope that all members of this House as representatives of our nation will join me in recognizing and saluting the memory of Father Louis Quinn.

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[Translation]

OLYMEL

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, on January 19, the Olymel company, located in the Lanaudière region, donated 60,000 kilos of pork and poultry, worth an estimated \$500,000, thus allowing 16,000 poor families and 5,000 underprivileged children to receive this food, through Moisson Lanaudière, in Joliette.

The hon. member for Montcalm and I wish to congratulate the company's CEO, Réjean Nadeau, his unionized employees and their president, Mario Maisonneuve, who agreed to work long hours during three weekends, out of solidarity with all these people. The Lanaudière families in need and the entire community are proud to acknowledge the solidarity displayed by everyone in that company.

On behalf of all my Bloc Québécois colleagues, thank you for your generosity, and congratulations on your fine humanitarian action.

*Statements by Members**[English]***STATUS OF WOMEN**

Mrs. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, January 28 was the 20th anniversary of the Supreme Court of Canada's Morgentaler decision, which decriminalized abortion in Canada. The legal decision was a victory for Canadian women. The court fully recognized that the law was unfair and that it presented unreasonable obstacles to women seeking abortions.

While the Morgentaler decision is something to celebrate, women in Canada still face obstacles in accessing abortion services. The number of hospitals in Canada providing these services is declining and some provincial governments are violating the Canada Health Act by refusing to fund clinics, thus leaving women without the right to choose.

The government is failing ordinary women in Canada by not ensuring equal and accessible abortion services. This is an equality issue and another example of the government's disregard for the welfare and rights of women.

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ALZHEIMER AWARENESS MONTH

Mr. Patrick Brown (Barrie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, January is Alzheimer Awareness Month. The Alzheimer Society of Canada and its local organizations are asking Canadians to make a commitment to improving their brain health by making changes to help reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's.

Alzheimer's disease is a degenerative brain disorder that most often occurs in people over the age of 65. Alzheimer's and related diseases affect approximately half a million people in Canada, a number that will double within a generation.

Just this past Sunday, I attended the annual Alzheimer walk in Barrie organized by Erika Rice of the Alzheimer Society of Greater Simcoe County.

We are privileged to have representatives from the Alzheimer Society of Canada here today. They have come to inform us of their efforts to beat the disease in communities across the country and to help educate all citizens about the far-reaching effects of this devastating disease.

I would like to acknowledge the impressive work the society does and encourage my colleagues to attend the coffee break on the Hill event at 3:30 p.m. today to learn about what we can do as individuals and legislators in making the commitment to better brain health.

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● (1410)

RED RIVER FLOODWAY

Hon. Raymond Simard (Saint Boniface, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Manitoba's Red River Floodway is an engineering marvel and it has single-handedly saved Canadians billions of dollars in disaster relief funding over the years.

The floodway is currently undergoing a major expansion, with the federal government contributing 50% of the total costs, but there is a catch.

Manitoba Liberal MPs fought extremely hard to secure the first half of the funding from the Canada strategic infrastructure fund, having convinced the Liberal cabinet of the day that this project was of national significance.

The current regional minister, the member of Parliament for Provencher, does not believe this and is planning on paying for the second portion with funds that would normally be allocated to other Manitoba infrastructure priorities, and this in a have not province.

Manitobans are being robbed of \$170 million by the Conservative government. This is wrong. They should be outraged.

The floodway expansion is a project of national importance and we need a minister who believes this, a minister who will not cave in to his cabinet colleagues every time. In fact, we need a new government that will fight for Manitoba.

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HUMAN RIGHTS

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour welcomed the coming into force of the Arab charter, which calls for "rejecting all forms of racism and Zionism" and says that Zionism is "a violation of human rights" and poses "a threat" to world peace.

Eradicating Zionism would mean the eradication of the Jewish state. The Canadian government does not support Ms. Arbour in her endorsement of this goal. In fact, we call on Ms. Arbour to apologize, renounce the Arab charter and state unequivocally that Zionism is a perfectly legitimate movement.

Here at home, the Liberal Party must make clear its own position on the Arab charter. Saying one thing to one group and something different to another is deceptive.

Parliament should stand with one voice, condemn Ms. Arbour's remarks and support our democratic allies in Israel.

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*[Translation]***MANUFACTURING AND FORESTRY INDUSTRIES**

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government continues to ignore the thousands of workers in the manufacturing and forestry industries in Quebec. The announcement made on January 10 angered everyone affected by the worst crisis ever to hit the manufacturing and forestry industries, which are vital to Quebec's economy.

Quebec will receive only \$216 million of the \$1 billion spread over three years. This is a pittance when you consider that during the same period the rich oil companies in the west will benefit from tax reductions totalling \$2.8 billion.

*Statements by Members***ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS**

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Winnipeg South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is shocking that first nations people on reserve are denied the same human rights protections that all other Canadians enjoy.

After 30 years of this discrimination, our Conservative government is set to pass Bill C-21 in order to heal this scar. However, today, in the aboriginal affairs committee, after delaying the bill for more than a year, the Liberals, NDP and Bloc are conspiring to pass amendments that will nullify the effectiveness of this bill.

Former Liberal minister of Indian affairs, Robert Nault, has urged that this legislation be passed immediately. He says that it is a way to prove Canada is serious about equality, but fellow Liberals are not listening.

Yesterday, the Canadian Human Rights Commission released a report urging support for the bill. Yet again, the Liberals are just sitting on their hands.

As an aboriginal Canadian, I am offended by the actions of the Liberals over the last year. I demand that they end their anti-rights agenda and pass the bill without watering it down.

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ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak on a matter dear to my heart: the urgent need to declare dementia a national health priority.

The most prevalent dementia, Alzheimer's, is a degenerative brain disorder with no known cure, affecting one in thirteen Canadians over sixty-five. Only a national Alzheimer's strategy supported by increased funding for research, treatment and care and more adequate protection for vulnerable adults will prevent this deadly disease from overwhelming our human services system.

Family caregivers in homes and institutions in every community struggle to care for those suffering from Alzheimer's. They deserve our support. After question period today, our Speaker has invited every MP to learn more about the Heads Up for Healthier Brains campaign being waged by Alzheimer Society of Canada.

The Alzheimer's challenge cuts across political party lines and regional divides. I call upon all members of Parliament to come together and work together to meet this challenge.

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HUMAN RIGHTS

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last week three parties in the House of Commons came together to support the government's decision to withdraw from the Durban Review Conference. The conference became a platform for blatant anti-Semitism, making a mockery of the fight against racism.

In acting in this way, the right-wing Conservative government is thumbing its nose at the 43,000 workers in these sectors who lost their jobs in 2007. Despite the pressing need for assistance, this government has the gall to make this aid conditional on approval of the budget. This is blackmail. The silence of the Conservative members from Quebec is confirmation that only the Bloc Québécois members are defending the interests of the manufacturing and forestry industries in Quebec.

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[English]

NATIONAL RED SCARF DAY

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, tomorrow, January 31, is National Red Scarf Day. Twelve year old Miss Hannah Taylor initiated this campaign. As a young child, she witnessed a person homeless and hungry and was moved to take action to combat homelessness in Canada.

The Minister of Human Resources and Social Development and I met with this charming young lady this morning to express our government's support for her great work.

We recognize that a safe and stable home is an important first step on the path out of poverty. Our new homelessness partnering strategy works with other levels of government, the private sector and community organizations like Hannah's Ladybug Foundation to implement solutions that address local problems. Together, our work is delivering results.

We recognize National Red Scarf Day. On behalf of the government, I am pleased to acknowledge the valuable work of Hannah Taylor, the Ladybug Foundation and the Canadians who support this worthy cause. We thank Hannah.

* * *

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Alzheimer's disease indiscriminately affects close to half a million Canadians, robbing them of their memory, their ability to reason, and ultimately their independence, and yet there are changes in our lives that we can make to reduce the risk.

● (1415)

[Translation]

I hope that my parliamentary colleagues will spend their coffee break with the representatives of the Alzheimer Society and find out more about how to boost brain health in Canada.

[English]

I would also like to pay tribute to Sarah Polley's moving film, *Away from Her*, based on Alice Munro's short story, which illuminates the heartbreak of Alzheimer's. The film has been nominated for two Oscars. I want to congratulate Ms. Polley and Telefilm Canada.

As Canadians, we should call upon the government to ensure it mounts a proper campaign to make sure that we win those Oscars for an even greater awareness of Alzheimer's and the fabulous Canadian film industry.

Oral Questions

Yesterday, the meanspirited government could not resist the opportunity to politicize the issue. The member for Calgary Southeast irresponsibly misrepresented the multi-partisan support for the decision to withdraw from the conference. His intemperate comments undermine the constant struggle against racism.

On Monday, in the House, I called on the government to halt funding to non-governmental organizations that would be attending the conference. Yesterday, it took that step. Still, Canada should do much more to lead the fight against racism. Instead of taking the lead, the government attempted to smear members on this side of the House.

The government must stop playing petty partisan games and come together with all members of the House in the fight against racism.

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[Translation]

MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Ms. Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Michael Fortier, an unelected minister, does not hesitate to give lessons in democracy to the elected members of this House, which is quite surprising given that he refused to run in the recent byelection in Quebec.

He is perverting democracy by implying that he is elected, opening campaign offices in my riding and making government announcements in the company of Conservative candidates.

This is the same Michael Fortier, the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, whose office is currently embroiled in allegations of political interference, as we learned yesterday.

These are just a few examples of how this government pays lip service to the idea of democracy, which it blithely uses for blatantly partisan purposes.

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[English]

THE LADYBUG FOUNDATION

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate 12-year-old Hannah Taylor, who has joined us in Ottawa today and has taken on the personal crusade of raising awareness about the plight of homelessness in Canada.

Since the age of five, she has worked tirelessly to ensure that the estimated 20,000 chronic homeless people, who return to shelters on a regular and long term basis, actually find a place that they can call home. She has started The Ladybug Foundation, which she has created and is dedicated to ensuring that all homeless people receive the funds they need for food and shelter. Her foundation, her passion and her vision of ensuring that no one ever eats out of a garbage can is something we as a society must ensure takes place.

Tomorrow, The Ladybug Foundation will celebrate the first annual National Red Scarf Day, which will raise awareness about homelessness in Canada. I encourage all parliamentarians to support Hannah, her vision and the foundation by purchasing a scarf and visiting www.ladybugfoundation.ca.

Hannah is a great role model for all young people.

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● (1420)

JUSTICE

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the unelected, Liberal dominated Senate is doing everything in its power to delay the passage of the tackling violent crime bill.

The Liberal leader has the ability to ensure this vital legislation is passed quickly, but instead he ignores the safety of Canadian families and even ignores the advice from the Liberal Premier of Ontario.

Our government is getting tough on crime with this legislation. Bill C-2 would protect youth from sexual predators. It would protect our communities from dangerous offenders. It would get serious on drug-impaired drivers. It would toughen sentencing and bail for those who commit serious gun crimes.

Why is the Liberal Senate stalling? Canadians are fed up with a justice system that puts the rights of criminals ahead of the rights of law-abiding citizens. When will the Liberals stop sitting on their hands and support Bill C-2?

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

AFGHANISTAN

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, leadership demands honesty, but there is no honesty by the government on the mission in Afghanistan.

Last spring it said that there was no evidence of torture: not true. Last August the defence minister said that NATO was notified about the end of the mission: not true. Last fall it said that the detainee transfer agreement was working: not true. This week the Prime Minister said that helicopters were on order: not true.

When will the Prime Minister stop his campaign of misinformation?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me deal with the last one of those things.

In terms of helicopters and UAVs, a year and a half ago the cabinet of the government made a decision to procure this equipment. The equipment has been approved by budgets presented to the House, and the procurement process is under way.

That is what we are doing. We are out ahead of a recommendation of the Manley commission. We hope all members of Parliament will get behind the mission and support the good men and women who do such good work in Afghanistan.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, NATO was, to put it mildly, stunned by what the Prime Minister said this week. NATO was not at all prepared to hear that the Canadian mission in Afghanistan will not carry on as is after February 2009.

Will the Prime Minister acknowledge that he kept both NATO and the Canadian people in the dark?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, NATO is aware of this government's position and knows that we are ready to extend the mission only if NATO gives us additional troops and capacity.

Today, a NATO spokesperson said that NATO will work with Canada and will do its part to support the Prime Minister in his efforts to find these additional contributions.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister was not honest with NATO, nor was he honest with the Canadian people. For a year, he led NATO to believe that the Canadian mission would go on after February 2009 just as it was being carried out before February 2009. He only told NATO the truth about Canadians wanting the mission to change after 2009 because the official opposition pushed him to do it.

Why did he make NATO, Canadians and Afghans wait a whole year? Why?

• (1425)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government's position has been clear from the very beginning.

We extended the mission in Afghanistan until February 2009. What is more, we said that to further extend the mission would require Parliament's support.

[English]

Our position has been clear. The military mission today ends in February 2009. We believe and we have said that we will only prolong it if we can get the agreement of Parliament. Our position is that if we get certain additional contributions, Parliament should approve an extension of that mission.

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government changed the detainee transfer policy two and a half months ago without communicating that change to Canadians or to Parliament.

We now know the government also failed to communicate that change to our NATO allies in Afghanistan. Just this week, the senior spokesman of NATO said, "This came as something of a surprise to us".

When will the Prime Minister own up to his responsibilities as a leader, begin communicating openly and honestly with Parliament, with Canada and, above all, with our allies?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is patently false. We communicate regularly with NATO officials. I speak regularly with Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the secretary general.

On this subject matter, again, because of the operational details that are involved in this arrangement, which flow from the flawed agreement that we improved upon, NATO was appraised. It would have come through the chain of command in Afghanistan as appropriate.

[Translation]

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of National Defence claimed "operational security" as grounds justifying his refusal to tell Canadians and Parliament the truth.

But if operational security justified the policy change, then why did this government refuse to tell our NATO partners, our "operational" partners? After all, they have the right to know.

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the premise of the question is false. It is not true that Canada did not communicate with NATO. We have always communicated with NATO.

[English]

The deputy leader likes to wonder why we do not communicate on operational detail. It is because, and it should not come as surprise to him, the Taliban actually monitor the media. They might also be interested to know that he said, "...defeating terror requires violence. It may also require coercion, secrecy, deception, even violation of rights". That is what the deputy leader of the Liberal Party had to say to his favourite publication, *The New York Times*.

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[Translation]

PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, at the request of the Prime Minister's Office, Dimitri Soudas, the Prime Minister's press secretary and advisor on Quebec issues, put pressure on the chief of staff of unelected Public Works minister Michael Fortier to find an amicable solution to the conflict involving Michael Rosenberg, President of the Rosdev Group, a key Conservative ally.

Does the Prime Minister, who was elected on a platform of transparency and ethics, realize that the Conservatives are now behaving exactly like the previous government, with their interference and cronyism? Is that what they consider ethics?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): On the contrary, Mr. Speaker. This happened a year and a half ago and the company received no advantages or special treatment from this government.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister is telling us that it did not work, so it is okay. That is what he is telling us.

Conservative Senator Nolin said that it was rather unusual for a government. It is public knowledge that the Prime Minister likes to control everything. And his press secretary confirmed that he spoke to Public Works on behalf of the Prime Minister.

Oral Questions

Will the Prime Minister admit that there was political interference in favour of a party ally and that it was all directed by his own office?

• (1430)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Once again, Mr. Speaker, it is quite the opposite. It is very odd that the Bloc Québécois would complain that a business owner received no special treatment from this government.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, that is not all. There is also Leo Housakos, a major Conservative fundraiser in Quebec, who was recently appointed to VIA Rail by the government, and who was put to work and met with the Minister of Public Works' chief of staff, to push for Rosdev.

Does the Prime Minister, whose obsession for total control is well known, wants us to believe that he personally did not hear anything about this meeting between Housakos and the Minister of Public Works' chief of staff regarding Rosdev, particularly from his own press secretary—

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Government in the House of Commons has the floor.

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is very simple: at no time did we ask the senior officials of a department to change their strategy regarding the management of this issue. At no time did we pressure them to change their strategy.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister cannot ignore this issue and plead ignorance regarding the representations made by Housakos, and he cannot claim that this individual was a complete stranger, since it is his government that appointed him to VIA Rail.

In this context, will the Prime Minister tell us whether he ever met with M. Housakos at 24 Sussex Drive, his official residence?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Bloc member mentioned the names of two individuals of Greek origin, namely one employee who works here in Ottawa, and another who is a Conservative Party supporter, in Montreal. The fact that there are two Montrealers of Greek origin does not mean there is a plot.

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[English]

AFGHANISTAN

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I cannot hear myself think with the hooting and hollering that is going on. I hope that you will allow me to—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Yes, I quite agree with the hon. member. There does seem to be a lot of noise today in the House. It is Wednesday, but we can perhaps start the hon. member for Toronto—Danforth again so he does not lose time, given all the noise.

Hon. Jack Layton: Mr. Speaker, revelations of the Federal Court case challenging the Afghanistan detainee agreement reveal a high

level of coordination with most of the senior officials in Kandahar. It was stated in court that every senior minister travelling in the war zone must meet with the governor of the province.

Can the Prime Minister tell us when he last met with the governor, Asadullah Khalid, and was there any progress made at that meeting in ensuring that Afghan prisons under the governor's control are secure and torture free?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my recollection is that I met the governor on my first visit to Afghanistan in March 2006. This was not a question of controversy at the time. I do not believe I have met him since, but I can check my records.

The Minister of National Defence tells me he has met recently with the governor and has discussed these issues.

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Prime Minister said that he had not spoken to General Hillier about the detainees. Now we cannot get straight-up information. I hope we will get it in a statement in the House in the near future, because what we have here is a culture of secrecy and it has to stop.

In 2005 an Afghan prisoner died in Canadian custody. It was not deemed a matter of national security when the information was revealed in 2007, but since then, every other request has been returned with reams of blank pages marked "secret".

Did the Prime Minister give the order to stop the transfer and the making available of detainee information, or is he going to pass the buck to the Canadian military again?

• (1435)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the NDP has never been in government. Had he been in government he would know that government lawyers administer the Access to Information Act. They determine what sections can and cannot be released. Based on the terms of that act, that is not discussed with the government. The government has nothing to do with those decisions.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): First, Mr. Speaker, I find it degrading for a Prime Minister to make racially charged comments as he did, because we are talking about two individuals of Greek origin here. That is unacceptable on the part of a prime minister.

I have two questions. Could the Prime Minister tell us under which section of the Federal Accountability Act members of his own office and defeated candidates for his party are allowed to act as lobbyists without having to register? Could he also tell us which ethics rule he has taken out of the code for his press secretary, his right hand, Dimitri Soudas, to hear representations—

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform.

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Quite simply, Mr. Speaker, no favourable treatment was accorded and no special favours were handed out to the interested parties. Mr. Soudas indicated yesterday that he only looked into this issue to follow up on a question from a Montreal municipal councillor.

Oral Questions

Only the Liberals could find it outrageous for a staff member looking into an issue not to give special treatment.

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is my understanding that there is a settling of scores of sorts going on between Léo Housakos and Michael Fortier, who ran against each other in the riding of Laval West in the 2000 election. This explains why Mr. Housakos needed his trusted friend Dimitri to relay to him messages from non-elected member Michael Fortier.

As we know, the Prime Minister's Office is running the show. The problem is that Mr. Housakos was rewarded for his services to the Conservative Party, which, incidentally, raised funds for Mario Dumont, when the Prime Minister recently appointed him to VIA Rail.

When was the Prime Minister apprised of this issue, and what kind of ties does he intend to maintain where Dimitri Soudas and Léo Housakos are concerned?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member had much to say, but the facts remain the same: no special favours were handed out to any of the interested parties.

I understand how the Liberal Party can think that this is outrageous, a feeling shared by the member for Bourassa I believe. There is no scandal, however, but rather behaviour we can be proud of.

* * *

[English]

ETHICS

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, for once the ethics committee has investigated an unregistered arms lobbyist who got privileged access to the Mulroney Conservative government. It looks like nothing has changed.

Today we learned a Conservative Party bagman and unregistered lobbyist was secretly meeting with PMO staff unbelievably to lobby for the same company Karlheinz Schreiber had shilled for, breaking all the rules for the enrichment of the Conservative Party all over again.

The Prime Minister had to be forced to act in the Mulroney-Schreiber affair. Is this why? Is this just business as usual for a Conservative PMO?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, every time I hear a question from that member, I think I am reading the fiction section of the library. Once again he is engaging in fantasies.

No such lobbying took place in the Prime Minister's Office. That fact is clear and simple, and I do not know why he thinks otherwise.

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if those members want fiction, listen to what they have to say on detainees.

The facts are that Dimitri Soudas, a spokesman for the Prime Minister, intervened on a government file. He ordered senior

ministerial staffers, including a chief of staff, to attend meetings designed to influence a \$50 million deal. He did this to help a land developer that a party fundraiser described as "someone who is powerful, who is important" for Conservative votes and money.

The Prime Minister called the Mulroney-Schreiber inquiry because it touched the office of the Prime Minister. What will the Prime Minister do now that this has touched his office?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us summarize this latest scandal the Liberals have dug up. No favours were handed out, very different from the Liberal days.

Let us remember the Liberal days. That is when we would have seen the member for West Nova giving a grant as ACOA minister to a wharf and boat yard where his brother in law has a monopoly. Perhaps we can remember the member for LaSalle—Émard suggesting changes to legislation and introducing a bill that benefited Canada Steamship Lines, his company. That is when favours were handed out.

On this side, we do not hand out favours for political reasons. We do what is right for the people of Canada.

* * *

● (1440)

[Translation]

MANUFACTURING AND FORESTRY INDUSTRIES

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, in response to a question that I put to him, the Prime Minister said: "—the hon. member asked a question about a community development trust. The government has no reason to delay granting this money." Yet, when this fund was announced, the Prime Minister said that he had to wait for the budget to grant the money.

My question is simple. Will the Prime Minister act now, without waiting for the budget? Will he introduce a bill to implement an assistance plan, for which the manufacturing and forestry industries have an urgent need?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are in the process of working out agreements with all the provinces and territories for the community development trust. I hope that we can finalize these agreements as soon as possible, and I also hope that all the parties in this House will support this major fund.

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, there is nothing preventing the government from acting now. It does need any signature to do so, nor does it need to wait for the budget. After blackmailing parliamentarians with his announcement a month ago, when he made it conditional on the budget getting through, he is now going even further by saying that he needs the provinces' signatures to free up those funds.

Oral Questions

Nobody is fooled. The only thing that is missing here is the political will to implement this initiative. What is he waiting for to provide the necessary funds to our manufacturing and forestry industries?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we cannot spend money without having concluded legal agreements with the provinces, or without the approval of this Parliament. I hope that these agreements will be signed and that we will get the support of Parliament as soon as possible.

* * *

CHALK RIVER NUCLEAR FACILITIES

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the events surrounding Chalk River highlighted the fact that the problem is not limited only to the safe use of nuclear energy. This matter exposed this government's penchant for interference. In unceremoniously dismissing the president of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, Linda Keen, it fired someone who did not share the Conservative philosophy.

Will the Prime Minister admit that Ms. Keen's dismissal was merely a means to cover up the incompetence of Atomic Energy of Canada and to send a message to the public service, specifically, that the Conservative way is "my way or the highway"?

[English]

Hon. Gary Lunn (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first let me state that our government took full responsibility. That is in fact why we acted.

We followed a number of logical steps in dealing with both of these agencies to resolve this matter, followed by a cabinet directive, and ultimately bringing a bill before this Parliament when it was clear that this reactor should be resumed to ensure that we do not put people's lives unnecessarily at risk.

We acted and every single member in this House supported that legislation, every single party. Now they want to change their minds. That is not responsible.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General pointed out that the minister's intervention could be construed as interference with the agency's independence. The first purpose of the minister's intervention was to protect the commercial interests of Atomic Energy of Canada and the Conservative plan to promote nuclear energy.

Will the minister admit that he chose to defend the commercial interests of Atomic Energy of Canada in this affair and that, to achieve his ends, he did not hesitate to get rid of someone who did not share his way of thinking?

[English]

Hon. Gary Lunn (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is absolute, complete nonsense.

If the member wants to talk about the Auditor General, in fact she was asked about this licensing issue and she said, "With respect to licensing, yes, we would have been informed of that, but we asked those questions and there was no indication that there was a problem with licensing".

It became very clear that this reactor could resume operations safely and I am very pleased to report to the House of Commons that AECL has in fact completed the upgrades and this reactor is safer than it ever was before.

• (1445)

Mr. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga—Erindale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' bungling of the Chalk River fiasco has given Canada's stellar record on nuclear safety a black eye. The respected British journal, *New Scientist*, says Canada is "sending out a dangerous message over nuclear safeguards".

How can the Conservatives expect rogue countries to uphold international nuclear standards when the Conservatives themselves are trampling all over them for cheap partisan reasons? Could this be the Conservatives' way of getting their nuclear House in order?

Hon. Gary Lunn (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the only bungling here is the Liberal Party position, because the Liberal members do not know what they stand for. They change their minds every day.

It was very clear. Our government acted responsibly, completely within our authority. We brought all the technical experts from AECL, from the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission and independent experts, put them before this House until every last question was answered, and every member, every party of this House, agreed that it was the right thing to do, that this reactor could be operated more safely than it was before. It was completely safe.

It was unnecessary to put the lives of Canadians at risk. That was not acceptable to this government and we were not prepared to do that.

Mr. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga—Erindale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians do not agree with the firing of the nuclear safety commissioner. Communities that host nuclear reactors do not trust the government when it comes to the nuclear safety regulator. The city council of Kincardine unanimously passed a motion calling on the Conservative government to stop meddling in the independence of the nuclear safety regulator.

My question is for the Prime Minister. Why does he not listen to Canadians who live near a nuclear reactor? Why does he not respect the independence of the nuclear regulator, and more important, why does he not fire that incompetent minister?

Hon. Gary Lunn (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, the Liberals do not know what they stand for.

This matter was brought before Parliament. It became absolutely clear that there was not an issue of safety, that this reactor would be absolutely safe, and that we needed to overrule the regulator. Everyone supported that. That is in fact what this Parliament did.

We have to ensure that we are not put in that position again and allow that to happen. That is why we have taken decisive action and we stand behind that action.

* * *

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister's attack on the public service, science and the truth does not end with Linda Keen.

Oral Questions

Arthur Carty was the national science adviser to the Prime Minister until the Prime Minister eliminated that position. Dr. Carty was a voice of reason on climate change, stem cell research, resource management and the environment.

What inconvenient truth from Dr. Carty led to his dismissal? Does the Prime Minister not realize that his attack on science is making Canada look like the flat earth society?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is a preposterous assertion. Dr. Carty is a respected Canadian whom I hold in very high regard.

Under the science and technology strategy, which this government has put forward, there is an intent to focus the science and technology strategy to harness more resources. There is a group of extremely distinguished Canadians headed by Dr. Howard Alper who will be assisting the government.

These are Canadians who are well known and well respected in science. They will be working with us in order to focus our science and technology strategy. The individual in question is held in high regard by me.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Dr. Carty's firing has sent shock waves throughout the Canadian and global scientific communities. There is one other national government that has downgraded the role of the national science adviser. That is the Bush administration.

Is it an inconvenient truth that the Prime Minister is more interested in following Bush's advice on science than he is interested in following the advice of real Canadian scientists like Arthur Carty?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what is inconvenient is that my friend is not acquainted with the truth. He is certainly not acquainted with the truth on this particular issue.

The intent of this government is to strengthen the science and technology strategy of Canada. A great deal of what I work on is directed to do that.

Dr. Howard Alper is one of the most respected Canadians in science and technology. He has assisted the government of Australia in focusing its efforts. He has a very well respected group of Canadians who are focused on this.

At the end of the day, my friend I think will be forced to retract much of what he has said here today in the House.

* * *

• (1450)

KENYA

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are becoming more and more concerned about the increase of violence and political unrest in Kenya. Recently, our government committed \$1 million to the international Red Cross to support its efforts in Kenya and this is good news.

Can the Minister of International Cooperation tell the House if the government plans on providing any additional help to the Kenyan people?

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are very concerned by the events occurring in Kenya and that is why Canada was one of the first countries to respond. I quickly announced \$1 million in emergency funds to react to the violence arising out of the disputed election.

Violence has increased, so today I am announcing an additional \$3.3 million to alleviate the suffering of Kenyans. Canadians hope that a peaceful resolution can be found soon.

* * *

[*Translation*]

PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the allegations with respect to one of the Prime Minister's closest advisors are serious. It appears that Dimitri Soudas intervened on behalf of some Conservative friends. The conflict of interest laws are clear. Even perceived conflicts of interest must be avoided.

Will the Prime Minister at least suspend his spokesperson, Dimitri Soudas, until the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner investigates the matter?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to quote a former minister of the Liberal government, Jean Lapierre.

This morning he said that, after hearing the CBC report and reading the article in *La Presse*, he had to admit did not see a smoking gun and did not see a scandal.

He added that, in his political experience, dating back to 1974, any citizen can make a request to the prime minister's office, who may then forward it to the minister involved, that it is not a privilege to have a meeting and that any citizen has the right to be heard.

He also added that in his day, under the same circumstances, he would have—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Timmins—James Bay.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is unacceptable. Mr. Soudas is a key Quebec adviser working in the heart of the PMO who set up a meeting with public servants over a real estate deal and the government's response is "that's how we in the Conservative Party do business". This stinks of the old Mulroney era and the sponsorship question.

My question is simple. Is the Prime Minister going to send a directive to his staff that these kinds of meetings are okay, or are they going to be stopped?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I understood it when the Liberal Party was upset that special favours were not handed out. I am surprised to hear it coming from the NDP.

Oral Questions

However, let us be clear. At no time were departmental officials asked to change the strategy they had for dealing with the file. At no time were departmental officials pressured or asked to change their strategy. That is a fact. The other fact is that no special favours were handed out and no favourable treatment was accorded. It is something that people should be praising, not condemning.

* * *

MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Hon. Sue Barnes (London West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last month I participated with colleagues and local representatives in a round table about manufacturing jobs.

London is home to more than 40,000 manufacturing workers representing one in seven jobs in the area. Manufacturing matters to the people of London and the concerns were very real. Their jobs were at risk.

When will the government stop its inane talk of structural adjustment and laissez-faire, and show it actually cares about the workers and families who are under stress now?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can say as the Minister of Industry, many years ago I started my own employment working at a coal mine. So any time a Canadian loses a job, it is something that I feel strongly about.

Instead of listening to the complaints from the Liberals, from the party opposite, the government is getting things done. In terms of the manufacturing sector, nothing is more important in the province of Ontario than the auto sector.

I can assure the member that just yesterday, the Minister of the Environment, Minister of Finance, Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and I collectively met with the chief executive officers of the auto industry, working on making our country competitive and producing jobs for Canadians. We are getting the task done.

●(1455)

Hon. Sue Barnes (London West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that is rhetoric. What we need is more than a do nothing approach.

Aside from the losses of manufacturing jobs, this government fails to understand that these jobs provide many spin-off jobs in other sectors, such as retail, such as services. Lost jobs also mean lost revenue for all levels of government and increased costs for social services.

Again, I ask the government, when will it start offering manufacturing workers in our communities some immediate action and some real hope for their future?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we will continue to work with all of the sectors in the Ontario economy, indeed the economy across the country, to ensure that we are competitive and to ensure that we make innovations.

If my hon. friend would read the CIBC report, she would find that many of the jobs that are being lost are being replaced by jobs that are actually of equal quality or even higher quality. I encourage my friend to perhaps focus on CIBC rather than CBC as a source to quote in the House.

[*Translation*]

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Conference Board revealed that business confidence in the economy is at a 9-year low, even lower than at the time of 9/11. This is quite a reversal compared to the great hopes of Canadians before this government came to power.

After two years of inaction and 130,000 jobs lost in the manufacturing sector, why have the Conservatives not made any concrete proposals to save Canadian jobs?

[*English*]

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, after the last Liberal budget in 2005 here is what the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters said: "The Liberal budget fell far short of what is necessary...This is a clear example of opportunity lost". That is the record of Liberal government in Canada.

The record since we have been in government shows that we have reduced taxes for businesses dramatically to historic lows. We also brought in an accelerated capital cost allowance, all of which the Liberals voted against if they bothered to vote.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, listening to the minister's fiscal bragging is almost as if he has forgotten his disastrous fiscal past. His Ontario government ran on a balanced budget only to dump a \$5.8 billion deficit on Dalton McGuinty.

Does he not know his history? From Devine and Harris to Mulroney, from Reagan to Bush, it is Conservatives that run big, fat, juicy deficits only to have Liberals come in and clean up the ugly mess.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. Minister of Finance, and we will have some order please. Order.

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite's—

The Speaker: Order. Members would not want to waste time. The Minister of Finance has the floor and we have to be able to hear his answer to the question.

The hon. Minister of Finance. Order.

Hon. Jim Flaherty: Mr. Speaker, the member opposite's memory fails him.

There is a very well-known now Liberal in Ontario named Bob Rae whose government nearly bankrupted the province of Ontario from 1990 to 1995.

I would remind the member opposite also that in the last five years of the government of which he was a member, spending went up on average 8.2% per year. In one year alone, 2004-05, there was a 14.8% increase in spending. Talk about fiscal irresponsibility.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

**PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES
CANADA**

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in response to one of my questions, the Prime Minister suggested that we are asking questions about the influence peddling in his office, because the people involved are Greek. That is the same type of response we got from the Liberals to our questions about Alfonso Gagliano. Those are crass arguments.

Instead of using such arguments, could the Prime Minister simply answer my question? Did he ever meet with Leo Housakos at 24 Sussex?

• (1500)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is a big difference here. This company has not received any special favours or treatment. I do not understand the Bloc Québécois' complaint.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, how the internal disputes in the Conservative Party between supporters of the Liberal Party of Quebec and supporters of the ADQ are being resolved is their business. What I am asking the Prime Minister is not whether their approach is working or not, or which side won, but whether or not he met with Leo Housakos at 24 Sussex Drive? It is simple. Did such a meeting take place or not?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I know Mr. Housakos. I do not recall him visiting me at 24 Sussex, but I can check my agenda for the leader of the Bloc Québécois and get back to him. It is common knowledge that Mr. Housakos is a supporter of the Conservative Party.

* * *

[English]

INDUSTRY

Mrs. Susan Kadis (Thornhill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government continues its laissez-faire "I don't care" approach to the manufacturing crisis. The industry minister tells laid-off Canadians it is just a structural adjustment and they should wait for new jobs in high technology. Yesterday, we learned that high tech computer giant Dell is cutting call centre jobs in Ottawa and reversing plans to hire another 1,200 people.

Will the minister now admit that the government's do nothing approach is not working?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the members opposite did something last year. When we brought in an accelerated capital cost allowance, recommended unanimously by the industry committee of the House, that manufacturers wanted, a two year 100% capital cost writeoff so that they could get machinery and be more productive, what did the member opposite and her colleagues in the Liberal Party do? They voted against it.

* * *

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, stories of children being victimized by pedophiles and online sexual predators are deeply troubling.

Great organizations like the Manitoba based Canadian Centre for Child Protection are targeting those who prey on the Internet. Yesterday, the Minister of Public Safety announced that it would receive one of the federal government's largest investments ever to a national charitable organization.

Could the minister tell the House how yesterday's announcement will reduce child victimization, increase the personal safety of children and reduce the risk of sexual exploitation?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me first congratulate the member for Kildonan—St. Paul on her work not only related to the protection of children but also in human trafficking.

I believe this was the single largest donation of resources to a non-government organization, being the child protection centre. It offers a service to parents and also an age sensitive based service to children related to dangers of predators on the Internet. Also, through cybertip.ca, the organization is able to pass on concerns or tips related to people who may be exploiting children on the Internet. It is doing incredible work that will reduce this type of activity.

We would hope the Liberals would hurry up and move on our legislation on this, too.

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SOFTWOOD LUMBER

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on October 12, 2006, a very sad day, the Conservatives sold out the softwood lumber industry. Over 10,000 good jobs have been lost since. One billion dollars was thrown away and another half billion dollars in punitive taxes were levied against businesses that could not afford to pay.

Now we find out that the U.S. lumber lobby opposes the long overdue community trust fund. Is that why the Conservatives are delaying the plan, because the U.S. gets a veto?

Why will the government not put the trust fund to a vote today and get the money into the hands of the communities that need it now?

• (1505)

Hon. David Emerson (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we all know that the U.S. Coalition for Fair Lumber Imports is one of the most protectionist organizations in all of North America. It opposes every policy that is announced in the forestry area in Canada. This one is no different.

The U.S. government has not brought this issue to arbitration. I do not expect it will.

Privilege

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this government has given the Americans veto power, as everyone knows.

From Trois-Rivières to Lebel-sur-Quévillon, from Prince Albert to New Westminster, from Kirkland Lake to Thunder Bay, from Flin Flon to Hinton, from Kamloops to Terrace, from Mont-Laurier to Maniwaki to Témiscamingue, and many other places, communities have been devastated by this government's mishandling of this file.

Will this government stop this blackmail and help the forestry communities without further delay?

[English]

Hon. David Emerson (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the reason the U.S. protectionists do not like the softwood lumber agreement is that it prevents them from bringing more trade remedies against Canada. It prevents them from bringing anti-dumping cases. It prevents them from bringing countervailing subsidy allegations. It constrains them and they do not like it.

* * *

INDUSTRY

Ms. Colleen Beaumier (Brampton West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, recently we have seen layoffs in the high tech sector at giants Nortel and Mitel in Ottawa and mass layoffs at NCR in Kitchener—Waterloo and at Johnson Controls in Whitby.

Despite what the minister thinks, manufacturing does matter, especially in Ontario.

Will the minister at least acknowledge this crisis? Will he act for the thousands of Canadians who are losing their livelihoods, or does he just not care?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, cumulatively in budgets 2006 and 2007 and in the fall economic statement, there is more than \$8 billion in tax relief for Canadian manufacturers, many of whom are in the province of Ontario. There is \$33 billion over seven years for infrastructure. There is \$1.3 billion in annual support for the provinces for skilled labour and retraining.

As the Minister of Industry has already indicated, we met yesterday again with the CEOs in the auto sector, which is an important part of the economy, to see what can be done to help them. This is—

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles.

* * *

[Translation]

HOG INDUSTRY

Mr. Daniel Petit (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the European community recently decided to subsidize its hog exports. This is causing market distortions and seriously hurting our producers. Hog producers are right to call on the government to act. Unfortunately, the Liberals always sit on their

hands, except when they have them in taxpayers' pockets. The Bloc, for its part, is always empty-handed.

Can the Secretary of State for Agriculture tell us what the Conservative government can do for our hog producers?

Hon. Christian Paradis (Secretary of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question. It is important to remember that we have injected \$76 million into the industry to combat porcine circovirus, as well as \$1 billion in additional loans for the livestock sector.

Moreover, two weeks ago, I was in Paris to meet with officials in France's agriculture and fisheries ministry. France will shortly take over the leadership of the European Union. I made it clear that we were very disappointed at Europe's decision to subsidize hog exports.

We will continue to denounce such practices. The Liberals are sitting on their hands and the Bloc is empty-handed, as usual. But the Conservative government is giving our hog producers a hand when they need it.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order.

I must respond further to the question from the leader of the Bloc Québécois. My office looked into it: Mr. Housakos has not been to 24 Sussex Drive since we took power.

* * *

[English]

PRIVILEGE

ANSWERS TO ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of privilege predicated by the type of answers that the Prime Minister gave to some of the questions he was asked.

The Minister of Health is shaking his head, but when he faces the Greek Canadian community in the future, I will remind him.

I do not want to be interrupted. I have served five terms in this honourable House. I have had the honour and the privilege of representing my country Canada abroad and proudly see, as I look around this honourable chamber, the diversity that makes this great country of ours.

The Prime Minister in his response today put a black mark on the over half a million Greek Canadians who played even a small role in the development of this great country.

The Prime Minister insulted the entire Greek community. I want to get to the bottom of it. When answering questions that he was asked, why was it necessary for the Prime Minister and others to continually refer to these two people, Housakos and Soudas who works in his office, who supposedly acted improperly lobbying him, as Greek Canadians? I do not see how that ties together.

*Routine Proceedings***ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS**

● (1515)

[*English*]**COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE**

HEALTH

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the third report of the Standing Committee on Health. The committee has studied Bill S-220, An Act respecting a National Blood Donor Week, and has agreed to report it to the House without amendment.

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Orders 104 and 114, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the ninth report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs regarding the membership of the committees of the House. If the House gives its consent, I intend to move concurrence in the ninth report later this day.

JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Mr. Art Hanger (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the third report of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights. In accordance with the order of reference of Tuesday, October 16, 2007, your committee has considered Bill C-428, An Act to amend the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (methamphetamine), and has agreed as of Tuesday, January 29, 2008, to report it with amendment.

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 66(2)(a), I would like to designate Thursday, January 31, 2008, for the purpose of concluding debate on the motion to concur in the first report of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the House gives its consent, I move that the ninth report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs presented to the House earlier this day be now concurred in.

[*Translation*]

The Speaker: Does the hon. member for Cambridge 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.

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

Mr. Speaker, we have all faced difficult issues, dealt with difficult problems, but never before in my tenure in the last five parliaments or before, have I ever experienced this.

I would ask the Prime Minister on behalf of over half a million Greek Canadians, some of whom even supported that party, to send them a card like he has done in the past and apologize. I demand that he stand in the House and apologize publicly to each and every Greek Canadian.

In closing, permit me if you will, Mr. Speaker, to say that this is a dark day for the Greek Canadian community and each and every Canadian of Greek origin. They came to do things differently as the Reform Party. They proved—

● (1510)

The Speaker: Is the hon. government House leader rising on this question of privilege too?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there has been a characterization put on the Prime Minister's comments that is not at all in accord with the Prime Minister's intention nor with what he said. In fact, I believe the Prime Minister was defending the people of Greek origin from what seemed to be unremitting attacks from the opposition.

Leo Housakos, whose character was repeatedly attacked by members of all the opposition parties, is a very proud member of the Greek community whose service to the Greek community is second to none. He was director of the Montreal Hellenic Board of Trade, director of the Hellenic Academic Foundation, former director of Zoom Media, Hellas, Greece, and former executive vice-president of the Hellenic Congress of Quebec. This is someone of whom we are very proud. I believe that is the point the Prime Minister was making.

We should not be attacking these people. We should be taking pride in their origins, as we are, and be proud they have an opportunity to play a role in the mainstream of this country. It is not a crime for them to speak to people in the government. They should be allowed to participate in the mainstream of our country.

The Speaker: I have very grave concerns that this appears to be a continuation of a debate in question period and not a genuine question of privilege per se. I have not heard anything from the government House leader that indicated he thought this was privilege or not. It was a disagreement with the argument put forward by the hon. member for Scarborough Centre, and I found very little in his argument that appeared to affect his privileges as a member.

What I am going to do is look at what has been said today during question period and after. I will come back to the House if I feel there is a possible prima facie breach of privilege and hear further argument on it from members who are rising, but I am not going to hear more on this now.

Members can send me submissions on this point if they wish, but continuing the debate in the House on something that is not a question of privilege in my view is not proper, and I do not want to continue with this at this time. I think I have heard enough for me to at least have a look at the matter and see what has happened.

Routine Proceedings

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

*[English]***PETITIONS**

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Hon. Sue Barnes (London West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my constituents want to draw to the attention of the House the following: that Canadian museums have over 59 million visitors a year, including 7.5 million schoolchildren, that the economic impact of Canadian museums is estimated at over \$17 million; that adequate federal government investment is necessary to the survival of museums; and that museums across the country preserve our heritage and provide opportunities for both Canadians and visitors to learn and appreciate our past and future potential.

Therefore, the petitioners request the House of Commons to implement a new national museum policy that: reinstates full funding to the museum assistance program that was cut in 2006; increases the museum assistance program by \$75 million; provides multi-year annual operating funding to ensure that museums can operate in a stable environment, therefore allowing them to plan for long term success; provides special project funding to allow museums to undertake special projects such as travelling exhibits and professional development conservation; and provides research funding for museums to conduct important educational research, as they currently do not qualify for funds from other federal agencies such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. I present this petition on behalf of these constituents.

[Translation]

HOURLY RATES OF PAY

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to table petitions from members of the Canadian Public Service Alliance concerning hourly rates of pay.

[English]

TOBACCO PRODUCTS

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to present a petition in the House today that was delivered to me at a press conference in Hamilton by 70 youths representing the Central West Youth Coalition. The CWYC is a partnership of young people working to prevent their peers from becoming addicted to tobacco products.

These youths have gathered over 6,000 names on their petition calling on the Canadian government to protect young people from tobacco industry exploitation by incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Canadian law, including an appeal mechanism that would give young people an ability to monitor this law, and to encourage countries worldwide to follow Canada's lead.

In Hamilton, the campaign to stop the tobacco companies' aggressive marketing to youth was led by Chris Mooney of the Hamilton Crew for Action Against Tobacco. I am thrilled by the level of political engagement these youths are demonstrating.

Although House rules prohibit me from endorsing this petition, I fully support their overall campaign.

● (1520)

SENIORS

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a second petition as well, which speaks to my campaign for seniors who were shortchanged by their government as a result of an error in calculating the rate of inflation. The government has acknowledged the mistake made by Statistics Canada but is refusing to take any remedial action. The petitioners call upon Parliament to take full responsibility for this error, which negatively impacted their incomes from 2001 to 2006, and to take the required steps to repay every Canadian who has been shortchanged by a government program because of the miscalculation of the CPI.

The petitions are signed by hundreds of people from British Columbia. The petitioners are all people who have worked hard all their lives, have played by the rules, and now are finding it harder and harder to make ends meet. All the petitioners are asking for is a little bit of fairness from their government.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to present to the House hundreds of names of petitioners across Canada who are calling on the government to keep up the good work and continue combating the trafficking of persons.

AGE OF CONSENT

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, consistent with Standing Order 36, I have the honour to present a petition signed by 440 petitioners from my riding of Pickering—Scarborough East in the GTA who are calling upon the Canadian government to raise the age of sexual consent from 14 to 16 years of age in order to protect the children of Canada from sexual exploitation.

VISITOR VISAS

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have as well the honour to present a petition signed by over 200 petitioners calling on the federal government to lift the visa requirements for people coming from the Republic of Poland.

CRIMINAL CODE

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today on behalf of the constituents of Fleetwood—Port Kells to present a petition concerning dangerous offenders. The petitioners call upon Parliament to protect the most vulnerable members of our society. Specifically, they ask parliamentarians to expedite the passage of Bill C-27, on reverse onus for dangerous offenders, so that corrective action can be taken against convicted criminals who continue to pose a danger to the health and safety of Canadian families.

SRI LANKA

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition for presentation from over 700 signatories from east Toronto. They condemn the killing of the chief Tamil peace negotiator in Sri Lanka. They call upon the government and parties in Sri Lanka to end military aggression. They call upon Canada to urge Sri Lanka to do more to ensure that human rights are accorded to all in Sri Lanka.

CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the premier of Ontario has directed the province's chief firearms officer, whom he appointed, to undertake home inspections of firearms owners, effective immediately. The current targeted group of owners of firearms are seniors who are in lawful possession of more than 10 firearms. He is violating the constitutional rights of our seniors by conducting, without warrants, searches of their private properties on the basis of age.

It is recognized that our courts are having a difficult enough time keeping up with real crimes such as murder, rape, assault and other violent offences without persecuting law-abiding senior citizens in a seriously misguided attempt to crack down on gun crime by inferring blame for older hunters. Therefore, the petitioners are calling on Parliament to put an immediate halt to all inspections without a court authorized search warrant by the province of Ontario until such time as these inspections are scrutinized under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, including those sections that protect Canadian citizens from unwarranted and unreasonable search and seizure.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mrs. Susan Kadis (Thornhill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I am pleased to present two petitions in the House.

The first is from residents in my riding of Thornhill who are eager for federal investments in mass public transit. Today I am presenting a petition calling on the Prime Minister to commit to providing federal funding for the Yonge Street subway extension, which is critical to the quality of life of residents.

• (1525)

CANADA POST

Mrs. Susan Kadis (Thornhill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is also an honour to present today a petition signed by citizens across Ontario who call on the Prime Minister to urge Canada Post to commission a special issue stamp in honour of Diwali.

BILL C-458

Mr. Mervin Tweed (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present a petition from the great constituency of Peace River, Alberta supporting Bill C-458, An Act to amend the Canada Post Corporation Act (library materials), which would protect and support the library book rate and extend it to include audiovisual materials.

CANADIAN FORCES

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I stand today to present a petition calling on Canada to cease sending its officers to be trained at the U.S. army's WHINSEC, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, formerly known as the School of

Routine Proceedings

the Americas. WHINSEC has been alleged to teach counter-insurgency techniques, including torture and other egregious human rights violations. In 1996 the Pentagon was forced to release training manuals that advocated the torture of civilians as permissible, manuals that have been used at the school for years.

The petitioners call on Canada to take a stand with 203 U.S. members of Congress who voted to cut WHINSEC's funding, the countries of Bolivia, Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay and Costa Rica, which have announced the withdrawal of all personnel, and the thousands of Canadians who urge Parliament to cease sending Canadian soldiers to be trained at this academy.

MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have another petition to present today that deals with an issue of great importance to Canadians: our future economic stability.

Millions of Canadians who work directly and indirectly with the manufacturing sector are troubled by the headlines that talk of the upcoming layoffs and future plant closures. Already, 250,000 hard-working Canadians in the manufacturing sector have lost their jobs in the past few months, and there is great fear that more cuts are on the way. The loss of these jobs will definitely impact on the future economic prosperity of Canada and it is clear that urgent action is needed.

I ask my fellow members to join with me and the petitioners and work in consultation with labour and business leaders across the country to develop a plan to better protect Canada's manufacturing sector and secure our future economic prosperity.

[*Translation*]

GUARANTEED INCOME SUPPLEMENT

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to table a petition that in fact supports my motion M-383, calling on the government to improve the guaranteed income supplement in order to bring our least fortunate seniors above the poverty line. This petition also requests that guaranteed income supplement recipients be allowed to work the equivalent of 15 hours per week at the minimum wage of their province of residence without penalty.

Over 7,000 petitioners from all over eastern Quebec, from La Pocatière to the Îles-de-la-Madeleine, and even from New Brunswick, have agreed with the appropriateness of this motion. This shows that people, whether or not they are seniors, acknowledge that our seniors need to be lifted out of poverty.

I would like to thank Mr. Paquette, head of the Carrefour des 50 ans et plus de l'Est du Québec, and all the members of the affiliated clubs who worked tirelessly to pass around the petition, as well as everyone who signed it.

Privilege

[English]

INCOME TRUSTS

Mr. Blair Wilson (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, I stand today to present this income trust broken promise petition on behalf of Mr. Blake Johnson who remembers the Prime Minister boasting about his apparent commitment to accountability when he said the greatest “fraud” is “a promise not kept”. The petitioners remind the Prime Minister that he promised never to tax income trusts, but he recklessly broke that promise by imposing a 31.5% punitive tax, which permanently wiped out over \$25 billion in hard-earned retirement savings of over two million Canadians, particularly seniors.

The petitioners therefore call upon the Conservative minority government to, first, admit that the decision to tax income trusts was based on flawed methodology and incorrect assumptions; second, to apologize to those who were unfairly harmed by this broken promise; and finally, to repeal this punitive 31.5% tax on income trusts.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, under Standing Order 36, I present this income trust broken promise petition on behalf of Canadians from Calgary, Alberta, who remember the Prime Minister boasting about his apparent commitment to accountability when he said the greatest “fraud” is “a promise not kept”. The petitioners remind the Prime Minister that he promised never to tax income trusts, but he recklessly broke that promise by imposing a 31.5% punitive tax, which permanently wiped out over \$25 billion in hard-earned retirement savings of over two million Canadians, particularly seniors.

The petitioners therefore call upon the Conservative minority government, first, to admit that the decision to tax income trusts was based on flawed methodology and incorrect assumptions; second, to apologize to those who were unfairly harmed by this broken promise; and finally, to repeal the punitive 31.5% tax on income trusts.

● (1530)

VISITOR VISAS

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present a petition from 1,400 Canadians, 20% of whom live in my riding and are of Polish descent. They are presenting a petition to the House asking the Government of Canada to lift the visitor visa requirements for Polish citizens so they can increase family visitations, tourism, cultural exchanges and trade missions to Canada.

This is supported by 800,000 Canadians of Polish heritage. Canadian citizens no longer require a visitor visa to Poland. Poland is now using biometric passport technology, which is a very secure passport identification system.

I bring this petition to the attention of all members of the House of Commons and, once again, ask that Parliament lift the visa requirements for the Republic of Poland.

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 Deputy Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

MOTIONS FOR PAPERS

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 notices of motions for the production of papers be allowed to stand.

The Deputy Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

PRIVILEGE

ALLEGED IMPEDIMENT IN THE DISCHARGE OF A MEMBER'S DUTIES

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, I rose on a question of privilege relating to an issue where my staff was asked whether I was a member of the opposition parties in order to get some information. I would like to add additional representations.

Yesterday, after I made the question of privilege, the Minister of Health appeared in the House and stated that the questions were inappropriate and not standard practice.

In my presentation to the House on the privilege matter, I also laid out for the Speaker that there was an MP inquiry form that the employee of product safety of Health Canada had to fill out. That form was going to be sent to him by Ottawa, wherever the directorate is that controls these MP inquiry forms. When I spoke to him, he undertook to provide me with a copy of the blank inquiry form so I could see the nature of the information that was required to be reported to Ottawa.

I can report to you that as of today, Mr. Speaker, I have not received from that person the copy of the blank MP inquiry form, which the employee undertook to provide to me. I also have not received an answer to the MP inquiry I made on January 11. I can, however, confirm, although I was talking, as an example, about products coming from China where there was lead paint, today I received from the office of the Minister of Health a bulletin with regard to lead pencils.

*Government Orders***GOVERNMENT ORDERS***[Translation]***CRIMINAL CODE**

The House resumed from January 29 consideration of the motion that Bill C-27, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (identity theft and related misconduct), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Réal Ménard (Hochelaga, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to wish all of my colleagues and the staff here on the Hill a happy new year. After all, one can do so until the end of January. I hope that 2008 will be a productive year for all parliamentarians. Who knows what the future holds?

Bill C-27 is very important because it deals with a new kind of crime. Everyone was familiar with old-fashioned crime—theft of goods. Everyone knew about organized crime rings and gangs. You all know how hard Parliament had to work in the early 1990s to develop new legislation and move away from conspiracy provisions to make gangsterism a new offence. Everyone here is familiar with traditional crimes concerning offences against the person.

However, a new kind of crime—identity theft—is surfacing, and it is very worrisome. Identity theft is an economic crime. One in four Canadians has been a victim of identity theft or knows someone who has been a victim of an offence related to identity theft. The most common of these crimes is the fraudulent use of a personal identification number.

When people withdraw money from a bank, there are more and more organized crime rings that can access their PINs and, unfortunately, empty, steal from or appropriate their bank accounts. We know that this can cause major headaches for victims, not to mention damage their credit rating.

I would like to share some relatively recent numbers that illustrate just how big this problem has become. For example, in 2004, an estimated \$50 billion was involved in identity theft in the United States. In Canada, this phenomenon is just as worrisome. If my information is correct, we are talking about approximately \$50 million. Identity theft is therefore a very serious phenomenon. We need to define new offences to deal with it, and that is the purpose of the bill before us.

What are the most serious forms of identity theft? Here are some examples: theft of credit cards or debit cards, whether they are used in bank machines or credit unions; redirecting mail, that is, taking someone's mail and sending it somewhere else; pretexting, that is, pretending to be someone who is authorized to obtain the information. This can include telemarketing. We learned from recent news reports about people who claimed to be representatives from the Red Cross, soliciting by telephone, pretending to sell first aid kits. Such offences are becoming more and more common: pretexting in the context of telephone solicitation by marketing networks.

In addition to credit card theft, redirecting mail and pretexting, there is also hacking into computer databases. In fact, there are specialized networks capable of searching software programs and networks to steal data.

We know, for example, that even within public services such as the Régie de l'assurance maladie, the Régie des rentes du Québec and others, there are fraud artists who are able to extract information and use it for completely illegitimate purposes.

• (1535)

Another offence is the use of skimming devices to capture credit and debit card information, and stealing someone's PIN, something that we would never have imagined a few years ago. When we went to our credit union or bank to pay our bills, withdraw money or make deposits, we naturally thought we were in a secure environment. However, people routinely spy on seniors, in particular, and try to steal their PINs.

In a program I was watching on an English language channel, I even saw people in shopping malls and other public places stealing purses, like the one the hon. member for Québec left here. If I were not such an honest person, I could take the hon. member's credit card and PIN, and try to reproduce them for illegitimate purposes.

There are also networks in shopping centres. Someone will distract a person in a public place by engaging that person in conversation while two, three or four other people steal the person's wallet. One member of the network will claim to have witnessed the crime and will talk to the person, who is clearly shaken and emotional. The witness will give the person a telephone number, supposedly for a centre where you can report theft. This centre is bogus. A tape recorder has been used to record a voice as if the centre were real. The person who calls has to give his or her PIN, social insurance number, address and personal information, which completes the theft that is in progress. This happens in public places such as grocery stores, arenas or busy places where an organized group of three, four or five people can carry out such an operation.

So there is identity card theft, redirection of mail, false pretence, hacking into data banks, using sorting devices to gather information, stealing PINs by spying on people in financial institutions and, obviously, computer theft. These are examples of modern ways individuals and networks can use to access personal information. This is why we have to be increasingly vigilant about sharing information about ourselves. We have to be increasingly vigilant and shed the reflex to give out such information.

Government Orders

The government has introduced a bill that creates three new offences. Bill C-27 mentions obtaining and possessing identity information. That is the first new offence. Section 347 of the Criminal Code already prohibits the use of false pretence or forgery for unauthorized purposes. These offences have been on the books for a very long time. But the government is proposing three other offences, including obtaining and possessing identity information with the intent to use the information deceptively, dishonestly or fraudulently in the commission of a crime. This is a new offence that will be added to the Criminal Code, and we support this.

The second offence is certainly the most interesting with respect to what is currently happening. It concerns trafficking in identity information. This is an offence that targets those who transmit or sell information to a third party knowing that or being reckless as to whether the information will be used for criminal purposes.

The third offence is the unlawful possession or trafficking of certain government-issued identity documents that contain information about other persons.

● (1540)

These are three new offences introduced by C-27 and we will certainly support this bill. We support it because the issue of identity theft is of great concern. In committee, we will hear and obtain the opinions of our fellow citizens. We believe that we must do more. We are urging the government to consider the possibility of strengthening this bill.

We must recognize that the fight against identity theft is not just a matter for criminal law. The former Information Commissioner, Jennifer Stoddart, appeared before the committee dealing with information issues. This is the same committee that deals with ethics, which has been in the spotlight of late owing to the Schreiber-Mulroney affair. I do not wish to dwell on this matter but I must at least comment on these events.

Last night, I read the report by the former rector of McGill University who outlined for the government and the Prime Minister a certain number of scenarios, including first listening to the testimony of parliamentarians who will continue their work. The Bloc Québécois has the member for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert. I believe that my colleague from Marc-Aurèle-Fortin also sat on this committee.

There is, of course, cause for concern when a former prime minister, someone who held the highest ministerial and public office in this country, accepted money for making representations while he was still a member of Parliament and under circumstances that remain unclear.

While provisions concerning lobbying were added to Bill C-2, the fact remains that we have had a code of ethics since 1985 at least and that, in light of various ethical concerns, such action might appear suspicious. The presumption of innocence applies to everyone of course. The former prime minister has the right—it is his prerogative—to clear these things up; still, one can wonder, if only because this former prime minister did not report until 1999 income received in 1993. All this is fueling a climate of suspicion which, unless the record can be set straight, might tarnish the office of prime minister.

I will be following, with my colleagues from the Bloc Québécois, the proceedings of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. We can count on the dynamic member for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert to put the most pertinent questions. We will recall that the member for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert was voted parliamentarian of the year on the *Club des ex* show broadcast on RDI between Christmas and New Year's. I think that it is very wise to recognize the energy and professionalism of the member for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert.

I will close by saying that the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, the person responsible for access to information, was clear that the issue of identity theft, which is a growing phenomenon in Canada, cannot be fully and satisfactorily resolved through criminal law alone. She invited us to adopt civil sanctions as well. I will read what she said in committee on May 8, 2007:

I don't think it's just an issue of the Criminal Code. As you know, our law administrators hesitate to use the Criminal Code: the standards of proof are higher, and the charter may apply.

We know that in criminal law the standard is not balance of probabilities but proof beyond a reasonable doubt, which is a higher standard.

● (1545)

The Commissioner added:

And so very often you have to have a fairly clear-cut case to use the Criminal Code.

There needs to be a causal link between an offence, harm and the consequences. The Commissioner added:

[They] are very easy to prove and easy for citizens to understand.

She was talking about civil sanctions and gave the example of small claims court. Such courts exist in Quebec. I do not know whether they exist in other provinces. They are courts where one can submit a claim before a judge without the need to be represented by a lawyer. Matters that are important to a person are considered more quickly than in superior courts, where they may not be considered as important.

The Commissioner went on to say:

Small claims courts may provide a more easily accessible deterrent to the growing industry of ID theft. This means, of course, that I think the federal government has to work closely with the provinces, because a lot of what happens in terms of ID theft falls within provincial jurisdiction.

I get worried when cooperation between the federal government and the provinces comes up. The federal government has sometimes flexed its authority and completely ignored the will of the provinces.

Government Orders

For example, take the recent statement by Quebec's finance minister, Ms. Jérôme-Forget, who is also president of the treasury board and an MNA in west Montreal. Like previous finance ministers and all the premiers in the National Assembly, including Bernard Landry, she is opposed to creating a national securities commission. We know that this is an area the provinces can regulate. We therefore do not see the need for a national commission.

The same thing is true of the Kyoto protocol and the manufacturing and forestry crisis. It is quite something to hear all the premiers join together in condemning the federal government's insensitivity in offering \$1 billion in assistance. This is very little, considering what is needed.

Of course, what is most upsetting about the federal government's strategy is that it does not take into account where the job losses have occurred. In a case like this, you cannot simply distribute money on a per capita basis.

The Prime Minister says that each province will be guaranteed \$10 million, and each territory, \$3 million. Yet central Canada—Ontario and Quebec—accounts for nearly 60% of all the manufacturing job losses—57%, in fact, if memory serves.

Quebec, which has invested billions of dollars to help its industry, will therefore get \$276 million. Yet the federal government will have an estimated \$24 billion surplus for the next two years. Consequently, \$1 billion is simply not a serious offer when the Canadian economy is in crisis and central Canada—Quebec and Ontario—is being hardest hit.

The information commissioner invited the federal government to exercise its prerogative by using point 27 in section 91 of the Constitution, which enables the government to legislate on criminal matters. However, she said that Canada cannot combat identity theft without using civil law measures. This is the responsibility of the provincial governments, especially the National Assembly, because Quebec is the main jurisdiction where civil law is in force.

• (1550)

My time is up. I do not believe anyone has a question, but I will be happy to answer questions if there are any.

[*English*]

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the member to comment generally on the failure of the government's crime agenda, its total inability to fight crime, and the undemocratic way it has gone about it.

While he is thinking about that, I would like to say that last March, almost a year ago, the Liberal leader proposed that if the Conservatives did not propose a bill like this on identity theft, the Liberals would. So we are very happy they finally agreed. This is a step forward. We appreciate the support of the Bloc and the NDP on getting this identity theft bill through.

However, in the papers a few weeks ago, it was stated that the member for Saskatoon—Wanuskewin had suggested the Conservatives would not accept any amendments to this bill.

I am tired, being on the justice committee, of going to meeting after meeting, hearing expert after expert give testimony and speak about the terrible drafting of legislative bills and the government

suggesting it is not going to change them. Why do we have committees? Why would we have democratic input if we are not going to change legislation?

The reason the government's agenda is a failure is because it has not addressed dealing with crime. It has not addressed the causes. A perfect example of that is the government putting a bill forward as soon as we came back to increase the number of judges because it had not decreased crime.

I would like the member to comment on, first, the failure of the government's crime agenda because of what is in it and, second, the undemocratic way that sometimes occurs in some of the proceedings as I know he has experienced as a great representative on the justice committee.

• (1555)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Réal Ménard: Mr. Speaker, I join in extending praise to the government on this specific bill, Bill C-27. All parties support this bill. We will see if amendments are required after committee consideration. It is, of course, the prerogative of committees to decide whether or not they want to make amendments.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, to whom I offer my congratulations on his new baby, has to recognize, however, that there will likely be amendments as a result of the serious work we do in committee.

For the rest, our colleague from Yukon is right: the government's reform of the Criminal Code and most of its proposals were rather ill-advised. We need only think of conditional sentencing and the many bills providing for minimum sentences, even though all the studies show that these are not effective punishments. There is certainly cause for concern.

The Bloc Québécois, in conjunction with all the other opposition parties in some instances, has called on the government to take a more balanced approach to fighting organized crime.

[*English*]

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Mr. Speaker, the Bloc and the Liberal Party agree that over and above this legislation, which we all agree will reform the Criminal Code, there are a number of other things the government should be doing to deal with this huge problem of identity theft.

I would like the member from the Bloc to go over some of those things that we both agree the government should also be doing to deal with this problem. This bill alone would still leave a lot that could be done to prevent and stop identity theft.

Government Orders

While he is thinking of that, yesterday I gave the people of Canada many warnings about different types of frauds. One that I am sure most people must be aware of are these emails from people in countries around the world, a lot from Africa, that say that someone has died and they have \$10 million they have to get out of the country. They just need someone's bank account to do so and they will give a percentage of the money for the use of the bank account. Obviously, this is a total fraud. Once they get people's bank accounts they can forge their cheques and take their money.

So again, Canadian citizens, be very careful of people asking for anything personal, such as an address, a mother's maiden name, a bank account or a social insurance number. People should not give out this information unless they are absolutely sure they are bona fide requests; they could save themselves a lot of grief.

So, to get back to the question. What other things outside of this reform of the criminal justice system could be done to help reduce this awful problem of identity theft in Canada that affects at least 9% of Canadians?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Réal Ménard: Mr. Speaker, the member is blessed with great wisdom. I would like to congratulate him on being a moderate and extremely clear-headed man. We will support this bill. We will see what the witnesses have to say in committee. We will not hesitate to make amendments if necessary.

However, we would like to see other reforms as well. That is why, a year ago, the Leader of the Bloc Québécois asked me to chair a party working group to propose reforms to the justice system.

I worked with my colleagues from Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, Ahuntsic and Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, and we produced a very good report that I am particularly proud of. We will turn these proposals into legislative reality at the earliest opportunity. In fact, we put these proposals forward last June, and they were quite well received.

For example, we were concerned about parole, the relevance of the accelerated parole review process and pre-trial detention because for every day of pre-trial detention served, two days are subtracted from the sentence. We were also concerned about the fact that socially, there is no law against wearing symbols representing criminal motorcycle gangs.

Those are the proposals the Bloc put forward.

Clearly, we have always been very serious, responsible and dedicated to the creation of the best possible measures for our fellow citizens.

• (1600)

The Deputy Speaker: Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

The Deputy Speaker: The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the motion carried. Accordingly, the bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights.

(Motion agreed to, bill read the second time and referred to a committee)

* * *

[*English*]

CANADIAN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION ACT, 1999

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC) moved that Bill C-33, An Act to amend the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, it is pleasure to lead off the debate on this bill today. It is very apropos.

Before I get into the meat of my speech, I would ask for unanimous consent to split my time with my parliamentary secretary.

The Deputy Speaker: Is there unanimous consent for the minister to split his time in this way?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Speaker, the member for Winnipeg Centre says that I owe him one and if it is just one, that is not too bad. I know the interest will pile up very quickly. He is a tough guy to deal with, Mr. Speaker, and you know that.

It is very apropos to have this bill before us today. Many of us enjoyed the camaraderie at the Canadian Renewable Fuels Association event last night in room 200, and everyone had a great time. It is a tremendous organization. This bill is the genesis of a lot of work it has done with the government to build the biofuels industry in Canada.

We are playing a bit of catch-up. The Americans and other countries like Brazil and so forth are light years ahead of us in getting this done. We are happy to work with them to make that happen, to get us an industry that will help us to start to meet our greenhouse gas commitments, which we are taking on globally.

This was a joint work piece between Environment Canada, Natural Resources Canada and my department at Agriculture Canada. Farmers will play a huge role in the way we will roll this out.

The amendments to the Canadian Environmental Protection Act are starting a job that will lead our nation and perhaps the world into an era of greater environmental sustainability. Currently the act provides authority for the regulation of sellers, producers and importers of fuel.

Government Orders

The proposed amendments in Bill C-33 will provide the additional authorities needed to make efficient national regulations requiring renewable fuel content in Canadian fuel. The authorities we are seeking include: the authority to regulate at point of fuel blending; authority to track exports; and exemption for small volume producers and importers. This is another example of how our government is taking concrete action to promote biofuels production in Canada, acting as a catalyst to an industry that is going to have wide sweeping benefits.

As the Prime Minister has said, the domestic and global appetite for more environmentally friendly sources of energy is growing by the day. Canada is and will remain an energy superpower. We rank fifth in the world in total energy production, which is amazing. We are America's largest supplier of oil, natural gas, electricity and uranium. With the government's actions today, we are on our way to becoming a clean energy superpower adding biofuels to that list.

In December 2006, the government began to move Canada toward smarter consumption by announcing our intention to require a 5% average renewable content in gasoline by 2010. We also signalled our objective to develop a similar requirement of 2% renewable content in diesel fuel and heating oil by 2012.

Meeting these requirements will make a real difference for the Canadian environment and overall the globe. Reaching these targets will be the equivalent of taking almost one million cars off our highways. That is substantive. Close to three billion litres of renewable fuels will be needed annually to meet the requirements of these new regulations. It is a very substantive start.

Canadian production in 2007 was about one billion litres, so the expansion will represent tremendous economic opportunity for Canada's 61,000 grain and oilseeds producers, and they welcome the challenge.

With the transportation sector accounting for more than one-quarter of Canada's greenhouse gas outputs, increasing the renewable fuel content in gasoline will put a huge dent in emissions.

The health and well-being of Canadians depends on the quality of both our environment and our economy. They do go hand in hand.

The government has announced \$200 million in funding for the ecoagricultural biofuels capital initiative designed to encourage agriculture producer investment in biofuels production facilities and that is through my department.

We have recently announced the first two contribution agreements under this program for a new biodiesel plant in Alberta and an ethanol plant in Saskatchewan, which I had the pleasure to attend the opening. It happens to be in my riding. It is at Unity, Saskatchewan. It is a component of the North West Terminal, a privately owned farmer producer owned terminal, which is now expanding into the ethanol industry. I welcome its tremendous input in designing a lot of what we are doing.

The gentlemen on the ground there, chaired by Gerald Rewerts and Merv Slater, Bill Fraser and Jason Skinner, the manager of the facility and his dad, Jim Skinner, the chair of the board, put together a lot of ideas and worked with us to develop a lot of regulatory positions and so on that would help them. I give them a tremendous

amount of credit for taking the time to educate us in the real world of ethanol and biofuel capacities. They have done a tremendous job.

We expect to sign several more agreements with other plants, with farmer participation, in the very near future.

• (1605)

As well, we have invested \$20 million in the biofuels opportunities for producers initiative, or BOPI as everybody knows it. This initiative provides assistance to biofuels related projects across Canada with farmer representation in it. About 120 have applied for these funds. It helps them design their business plans.

This will help reinvigorate rural Canada, and we know so well that rural communities often find themselves isolated. They have higher transportation costs. Everything costs more to get there. Changing over to biofuels will help our environment. It will also help these people feel like they are tied back into mainstream Canada.

Producers will be able to contract with and ship to a processor in the nearest town rather than halfway around the world. That will save energy as well.

These new plants are great news for our farmers, providing a new market for their wheat, corn, canola and potentially other crops as we start to design high starch products, higher oil commodities to give us a broader range of feed stocks. It is all good news.

All of this presents an exciting new market for Canadian farmers. Biofuels production is helping farmers grow their businesses while creating new jobs, especially in rural communities. Biofuels offer economic benefits to farmers and communities by providing an alternate local market for their production of grains and oilseeds.

We will continue to feed the world and supply energy too. There is a lot of discussion out there that we have to do one or the other, but we cannot do both. We have the capability, with our modern agricultural techniques and our climbing yields per acre. They have been increasing for decades. This is part of the problem that our grains and oilseeds sector faced over the last number of years. They got too darned efficient. They got too good at what they did. They are looking for another stream of production to work their products into. This is the answer to the questions they have asked.

Government Orders

We have no problem keeping up with the demand for our supply of safe, secure quality food we produce on our farms, but we can also supply that energy market and have the expertise to market both commodities as well as supply the domestic demand. I know my producers are up to that job, and I know yours in Manitoba are too, Mr. Speaker. They are looking forward to that challenge. They are that efficient.

Looking beyond grain and oilseed based fuels, the government understands that biofuel technologies are evolving every day, and that is a fact. We have had some great work done at the University of Saskatchewan. We have had other universities and private sector initiatives working on facilities as well, and the sky is the limit. These folks are moving well ahead.

We have invested \$500 million in new technology that will take waste products such as wheat straw and wood chips and turn them into valuable commodities to create cleaner burning renewable fuels.

We have also seen a lot of work done on methane recapture. We have seen a tremendous amount of work being done on biodigesters. We are seeing slaughter facilities that are able to take the parts and pieces of cattle, the SRM, specific risk materials, and work them in such a way that they are generating a diesel product out of that type of commodity.

I have had discussions with the McCain folks in Brandon, a large facility. They slaughter some 1,300 hogs an hour. They are taking a lot of the waste products and running them into biodigesters. They have a line that will start to turn biodiesel out of that end of the facility as well. It is all good news.

We are taking that product out of the landfills. We are taking it out of the environmental concerns by turning it into biodiesel and bioethanol products. It is just a tremendous opportunity to move ahead.

In July Prime Minister Harper announced an investment of \$1.5 billion over nine years—

●(1610)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sorry to interrupt the minister, but he knows he is not supposed to refer to the Prime Minister by name, or anybody else for that matter.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Speaker, I guess he is so well known across Canada, I do not have to do an advertisement for him.

The Prime Minister, whom everybody loves, made an announcement of \$1.5 billion over nine years under ecoenergy for biofuels. This is a tremendous incentive program for producers of renewable alternatives to gasoline and diesel fuel. In total, we are investing some \$2.2 billion over nine years in biofuel development across our great country.

When it comes to biofuels, the facts are clear. Biofuels will increasingly provide a cleaner burning, renewable energy source for all Canadians. Across the board, biofuels reduce harmful greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, pure ethanol reduces greenhouse gas emissions by about 40% over its entire life cycle. That is tremendous news.

This is why we are looking ahead to the next generation of biofuels development such as wheat straw, corn stover, wood residue and switchgrass.

The government is not just investing in biofuels. We are investing in Canada's future. We are focusing on innovation. We are supporting farmers in their tradition as good stewards of the land. A strong biofuels sector will contribute to a stronger foundation for farmers, communities and all Canadians.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Liberals are supportive of renewable fuels. We put millions of dollars into biodiesel and ethanol in the past, and we are supportive of that direction.

I have a question. Could the member outline for us, because I am sure the department would have done a lot of research on this, the effects of the major ethanol industry in Canada and the United States on our farmers.

Has it caused an increase in the price of corn? If that has occurred, has it therefore been of help to our farmers? I assume it would be. Have other food industries in Canada that use corn as an input been affected? What is the department's analysis on those types of impacts?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Those are quite broad reaching questions, Mr. Speaker.

Of course, there have been studies done. For every gain there is always a cost. We have certainly seen the price of corn skyrocket, go up by tremendous gains. We have seen the price of barley and some of the wheat feedstocks and so on go up. There is some gain to farmers overall. There is a gain there. There is no doubt about that.

The downside at this point is that we do not have enough production, that there is enough distiller's grain, which they can now use as feedstocks with some additives, into the livestock sector to offset the higher cost of corn, barley et cetera. We are in that transition period between the greater good for everyone and everybody getting a fair slice of what will come.

I have no doubt at all that within the next two to three years, as a lot of plants come online, that it will lower the cost of feedstocks to the livestock and hog sectors, and everybody will gain by this.

We will also benefit by having a quality product. One of the highest inputs for the livestock sector and the grain sector is fuel. When we rely on fossil fuels, we do not control the cost to the same extent as we do when it is our canola in our facility in the next little town, which we are able to buy back when it is blended and used. There is a tremendous amount of opportunity out there.

The member started off by talking about the Liberals supporting this initiative. I welcome that. I am hopeful that we can pass this piece of legislation very quickly. I do not want to see games played with these types of initiatives as we are seeing with justice bills and so on. However, I know their hearts are in the right place. I know that no one wants to stand in the way of an increased value at the farm gate, so I welcome the hon. member's intervention.

Government Orders

•(1615)

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member's speech outlined some of the conditions within which the government wishes to promote biofuels. Biofuels are a very large component these days in many countries as they attempt to change their energy forums.

I had the opportunity to visit Brazil. I talked to many people there about the efforts they are making on biofuels. I saw the service stations where not only mixed gasoline-ethanol can be bought, but pure ethanol can be bought as well. It is a very large industry there with its own particular issues.

I noted the comment of the member. He said that we are playing catch-up in this world right now with the biofuels industry, and there is no doubt about that.

The question I have is, will we make the same mistakes that other countries have made with the biofuels? Will we make the same mistakes in this country, or will we learn from what the world has experienced with the development of the biofuels industry in order to ensure that our biofuels industry, our attempt, works better and gives a very solid future for Canadians?

The hon. member talked about getting a million cars off the road. He also talked about a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from the use of the biofuel. I will not argue with him, but the Environment and Sustainable Development Commissioner in a report a year and a half ago talked about a 20% improvement, using ethanol in the mix, that was assigned in terms of the life cycle of that product and the energy used to produce it.

Which is the number the hon. member is using? Does a million cars off the road represent the 20% improvement in CO₂ emissions, the 40% improvement in CO₂ emissions—

The Deputy Speaker: We will have to stop it right there and give the minister an opportunity to respond.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, there are questions that should be asked of the Minister of the Environment or the Minister of Natural Resources. Those are outside the purview of my agricultural department.

I am speaking from a farm-based related situation. I did make mention of the million cars off the road. That is statistically correct. There are efficiencies to be gained.

The member talks about the Environment and Sustainable Development Commissioner making a statement a year and a half ago. The generation that we are facing now, a year and a half is ancient history. Any computer that is a year and a half old is now junk. Statements that were made a year and a half ago about the validity of this or the change in that are not of the same scope that they are today. That is how I would answer that point.

There is a tremendous opportunity for all Canadians to benefit from this. The biodiesel that we are going to produce is going to have excellent lubricity. It is going to have cold weather starting. It is actually better than fossil fuel diesel. We do have the same capability to use E85. In fact, my car is an E85 and a lot of the half tonne trucks that are running around at home now are E85. They have the capability to burn 85% ethanol.

We have had higher degrees of ethanol and my colleague mentioned that too. We have had 100% ethanol and even 150 proof, but we used to call that moonshine.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is a hard act to follow. Our illustrious Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food is certainly a good advocate for the farmer. He insists on putting farmers first, as does Bill C-33. I am, like the minister, very honoured to speak to Bill C-33 today.

It was about a year ago that the federal government first announced that it intended to introduce regulations as part of a national renewable strategy.

The regulations would require a 5% renewable content in gasoline by 2010. We also signalled our intention to develop a similar requirement of 2% for diesel fuel and heating oil by 2012.

Bill C-33 will enable the government to work with interested stakeholders as we develop regulations for renewable fuel content.

Approximately one-quarter of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions come from the transportation sector. The introduction of 5% renewable fuel content in gasoline and a further 2% in diesel will help significantly in reducing harmful greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector.

The volume of renewable fuel required under this initiative is expected to contribute to achieving a four megatonnes reduction in greenhouse gas each and every year. That is the greenhouse gas reduction equivalent, as the minister said, of taking approximately one million cars off the highways. It is the same effect.

I believe that the 5% average renewable content in gasoline and the 2% renewable fuel content in diesel fuel and heating oil are ambitious targets. There is no question. Together they equate to almost 3 billion litres of renewable fuels per year.

The government's renewable fuels initiatives are very important, for not only will they have a significant impact in terms of reducing emissions but they will also provide much needed financial support to Canada's farming industry. As we know, this minister and this department are here to put farmers first.

Industry is already moving quickly to ensure that it secures its place in what will become a very lucrative market, but industry cannot do it alone. That is why in the last federal budget the Prime Minister set aside \$1.5 billion over seven years for biofuel producers to assist in the development of our government's long term renewable fuels strategy.

Government Orders

On November 2 my two caucus colleagues, the Minister of the Environment and the member of Parliament for Leeds—Grenville, were in Johnstown, just an hour from here, where they announced that the Government of Canada was contributing \$15 million to assist GreenField Ethanol with construction of an ethanol plant in Johnstown, Ontario.

According to GreenField Ethanol estimates, this new facility will remove an estimated 370 tonnes of carbon dioxide from being emitted into the atmosphere each and every year and it is expected to remove 9.25 million tonnes of carbon dioxide over the life of the plant.

Shortly thereafter, the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance was in Aldersyde, Alberta, representing the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, where he announced that the federal government through the federal ecoagriculture biofuels capital initiative would contribute \$638,000 to help build a biodiesel plant in that area.

For those who are not familiar with the ecoABC initiative, it is a federal \$200 million four year program that provides repayable contributions for the contribution or expansion of transportation biofuel production facilities. It is designed to provide an opportunity for agricultural producers to diversify their economic base and participate in the biofuels industry through equity investment ownership in the biofuels production facilities.

These are but a few examples of the government taking action to reduce our dependence on greenhouse gas emitting fossil fuels and promoting a cleaner biofuels industry.

This is an exciting time for the biofuels industry. I expect, as demand for biofuels increases and as Canadians and industry adapt to this new product and technology, we will see a significant rise in the production of biofuels which will mean a huge financial boost to our farming community and, as I mentioned, a significant decrease in our greenhouse gas emissions.

● (1620)

Canada is not alone in turning to renewable fuels as a means of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The United States has regulations requiring 4.7% renewable fuel content in gasoline and is moving to higher levels. The European Union has already set a 5.7% target to be reached by 2010.

This government has never claimed that its biofuel initiative will be the ultimate solution to reducing greenhouse gases linked to climate change. What we have said is that it is an important piece of that puzzle.

In addition to our actions on renewable fuels, these programs include eco-energy initiatives, the eco-transport strategy, the trust fund for clean air and climate change, and support for public transport. Each of these initiatives on its own will not achieve our desired objectives. However, together they will provide Canadians and our international partners with the kind of results that they had demanded and expected from the previous government but never received, which explains why Canada is presently at 33% above Kyoto targets.

In summary, the Minister of the Environment and all members of this government are committed to working on ways to lower carbon dioxide emissions in Canada. This bill is not only good news for our environment, it is also good news for our farmers who will benefit from this new market opportunity.

Farmers around the world are harnessing the potential of biofuel development and our new government is proud to help Canadian farmers lead the way. I am looking forward to having the support of all members opposite.

● (1625)

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am sure members of the House appreciate the overview that has been given by our colleague from the government.

There has always been a controversy with respect to our strategic plan and positioning between ethanol that is grain based and cellulose based. We should factor in to that particular question a recent comment made with respect to a worldwide projection of a grain shortage. Many countries are re-adapting their agriculturally based output of ethanol to a grain based technology. I wonder if the member would make a comment with respect to that.

We all agree with the objectives that the member has outlined with respect to the environmental implications and so on. Is there any cause for concern with respect to that kind of a strategy when those kinds of concerns in fact are being expressed by, and pardon the pun, seasoned commentators who are quite aware of what the implications could be?

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague's question is a valid one and does not have an easy answer.

This is the beginning. We are starting out in an industry that is very fragile and is in its infant stages. As the minister spoke about a little earlier, already things are moving very rapidly in this industry. With new technology it is improving all the time.

Already cellulose and cornstalks are being used in the production of ethanol and we are moving ahead at a very rapid pace. Undoubtedly, there are some dangers we want to monitor. We want to be on top of our food production. We do not want to sacrifice our food production for fuel necessarily, but there are many experts who will say that this is certainly manageable.

The important thing is that finally our farmers have a chance to open up a whole new market, and what a wonderful market. As the minister said, a lot of these things at one time were considered waste and were a cost to dispose of but now will be able to be used for profit. That has made farmers in this country open their eyes to the opportunity to move ahead in a profitable, sustainable manner.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I think we are going to have a very active debate in Parliament on this issue because we are speaking not simply of agricultural policy but we are investing \$1.7 billion in a greenhouse gas reduction program. Clearly that is the driving force behind this as well and the selling part of what we are doing here today.

Government Orders

Could the parliamentary secretary inform us as to analysis that took place? Perhaps he could comment on the opportunities for the use of biomass in heating and in many other forms and the use of biomass in the production of ethanol. What is the relationship between costs and greenhouse gas reduction and the opportunities that exist in Canada? Was that kind of study a part of the development of this bill?

• (1630)

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Mr. Speaker, my colleague seems to have a penchant for knowing the intricacies that I in all honesty am not totally aware of, but I do know that we have some people in the ministry of the environment who would be glad to answer his specific enquiries.

I would like to mention a couple of quotes from some reputable people who seem to indicate that we are on the right path. I would like to quote something from the Canadian Renewable Fuels Association. Its president, Gordon Quaiattini, said:

Oil at \$100 makes the case for biofuels crystal clear. The price of oil is simply too high and too unreliable. We must continue to diversify our fuel supply.

He went on to say in the Ontario *Farmer*—

The Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. parliamentary secretary but he does have one of his own colleagues who is really eager to ask him a question and I am trying to get it in.

The hon. member for Selkirk—Interlake.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the parliamentary secretary and the Minister of Agriculture for bringing forward this bill. This is a great story. It is a win-win-win any way we look at it. It is a win for the environment. It is a win for farmers across this country. It is a win for rural development.

There are two biodiesel plants already operational in my riding. They have just opened their doors and are starting to crush canola and make biodiesel because of these programs. This is creating local jobs. It is creating an opportunity for local supply. This is a great thing for Canada right across the board.

There have been concerns raised about a potential food shortage, grain shortage. We have to understand what is really happening. There have been tremendous crop failures in Australia, South America and parts of Europe. That is why we have a grain shortage. It has nothing to do with biofuels.

What we are trying to do definitely stimulates the marketplace for farmers. We want to make sure that our farmers can make a living off the land and from the marketplace, and not live out of the mailbox. This is what it attempts to do and it really does start to drive the market that way.

Perhaps the parliamentary secretary could comment about the need to have more options in the fuel market. Right now, farmers are at the mercy of a few oil and gas suppliers and this actually provides a more diverse market.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Mr. Speaker, I certainly want to thank my colleague for his comments. Coming from an established farmer and the chair of the agricultural committee, his words are very wise.

Yes, undoubtedly this would give options to farmers to not only have their fuel supply at a lower cost but to make more money on their farm. This will give them an extra option where to sell their grains. This is what we want to do as a government. We want to put farmers first. We want to give them a chance to have sustainable farms on an ongoing basis. I am so glad to see that there is unanimity about moving this bill forward.

The Deputy Speaker: It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Bramalea—Gore—Malton, Citizenship and Immigration; the hon. member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Forest Industry; the hon. member for Davenport, Infrastructure.

• (1635)

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-33 sets out to amend the Canadian Environmental Protection Act in an important way.

The bill, for Canadians who are watching or who will read the transcripts of this debate, is really about expanding the scope that the Minister of the Environment has to regulate fuels in Canada. In fact, the brief summary of the bill says that the entire bill is merely to provide for what they say is the efficient regulation of fuels and the new measures that it puts forward are administrative in nature and give the government more control on regulations.

For example, the government enhances its ability to regulate fuel produced in Canada that is to be exported. Regulations can be made regarding the blending of fuels, how we mix them and in what percentages, an obvious nod as we have heard to the expanding biofuel industry. It also expands the basis upon which a government can distinguish between different kinds of fuels. It is fundamentally a housekeeping bill. There is really nothing in the bill that will immediately affect any commercial interest or immediately require any fuel producer or vendor to do anything. It is a very preliminary step that will allow the government to regulate all kinds of fuel within the same regulatory regime.

From that perspective, it is an improvement over the current wording of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. The official opposition supports the bill in principle and we look forward to discussing the merits and the parameters of any new regulations that will come from the bill when it gets to committee.

That being said, I would like to continue with my remarks in three separate ways. First, I would like to talk about the government's setting of a 5% ethanol standard in Canada. I would like to talk about the incoherence of that new target that is forthcoming with the changes the government is bringing about to the excise tax exemption. Finally, I would like to talk about how this fits, or does not fit, into a climate change plan which frankly has been completely discredited by all third party observers in Canada.

Government Orders

This morning we saw news reports that four major Canadian provinces, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec, have decided to no longer wait for the federal government in terms of coming up with a coherent climate change plan. They are going to go it alone. They are looking at designing their own cap and trade system. They are looking at the potential of fungible trading, trading that can happen between Canada and Canadian provinces and American states, for example.

This is happening at a time when the government is bringing in a minor technical adjustment bill to allow for the regulation of new fuels, which is only a very small part of what should be a coherent national climate change response.

Let us talk about Bill C-33 and what it actually will do if the government is going to follow through, as the environment minister and the agriculture minister have both said, with a 5% national ethanol mandate by 2010.

First, the official opposition has been calling for a 10% ethanol position since last January when the Leader of the Opposition challenged the government in a speech to Saskatchewan farmers in Regina to increase to 10% what had already been put forward in our election documentation of 2006 calling for a 5% ethanol content.

It is important for Canadians to know that all car manuals, in every car sold in Canada today, tells car owners that today they can in fact use a 10% ethanol content in their engines as they run their cars.

We know that if we had a 10% mandate in Canada as opposed to the weaker 5% put forward by the government, it would double the amount required to some four billion litres a year, a figure already surpassed in terms of those plants that are presently operating, under construction and being financed. When the Minister of Agriculture and his parliamentary secretary speak about supporting our farming community, one has to ask the question, why is the government pursuing such an unambitious target of 5%?

• (1640)

In fact, in late June the former minister of agriculture labelled the official opposition leader's call for 10% as "overly aggressive", which the Canadian Report on Ruel Ethanol says is in itself an excessive term given that Ontario, the country's largest gasoline market, is already moving from an existing annual average E5 requirement to 10% starting in 2010. Why is the federal government lagging behind the province that consumes the largest amount of gasoline in the country? There is no explanation so far.

It is interesting to note as well that the Renewable Fuels Association that was quoted just moments ago by the parliamentary secretary is in fact driving for a 10% ethanol content. It says that since today all car manuals allow for 10% ethanol, this means that the government's legislation will allow for two years of the use of sub-environmental quality gasoline, that is, 5% ethanol, but two years later such blends have to be increased to at least match the level allowed for in 100% of all car manuals.

Thus, even the Renewable Fuels Association and its president Gord Quaiattini, who was just quoted by the parliamentary secretary, are opposed to the government's standard. Some consultation. Some

leadership. All of this, of course, is in the context of the climate change plan.

Let us talk for a few minutes about the science behind ethanol and greenhouse gas reductions. Three or four colleagues have raised questions about the merits of one form of ethanol derived from one plant substance over another form of ethanol derived from yet another plant substance. Let us talk a bit about that.

I was quite astounded, in fact, to hear the Minister of Agriculture tell the House that this is his bill but he is unable to speak about the environmental considerations that ought to be paramount with respect to what he is trying to accomplish here.

We know that the environmental impact of ethanol depends very much on the raw materials and the production process used to make it. Studies of corn based ethanol, which is the most common form in North America, vary in how much greenhouse gases can actually be reduced. Some studies say there can be a net positive effect, while other studies say there can be a net negative effect. It depends on how it is measured.

Berkeley University found that corn ethanol reduces greenhouse gas emissions by about 13%, whereas another form of ethanol called cellulosic ethanol would produce about 85% fewer greenhouse gases than gasoline. That is 13% for corn and 85% for cellulosic ethanol. In terms of greenhouse gas emissions per mile driven, gas with 10% ethanol lowers emissions by 2% and E85 lowers emissions by 23% for corn based ethanol and 64% for cellulosic.

There are major concerns, realistic concerns, that heretofore we have not seen even mentioned by the government and we hope to see these debated in committee.

As we heard from the minister recently, the new demand for corn to produce ethanol is inflating corn prices, raising the price of both corn based products and other commodities that use corn as feed, such as beef, pork, and milk, for example. It raises the price of substitute crops, particularly as farmers switch to corn and produce less of the other crops. Some argue it could harm our exports of corn based or corn fed products. The proponents, those who favour corn based ethanol, say there is still a crop surplus carried over each year and that yields are growing.

• (1645)

Here is something else. We know that even small increases in grain costs harm poor people the most and could exacerbate world hunger. The often cited example is the price of tortillas in Mexico, which doubled in 2006, a year of record United States corn prices. Mexico gets 80% of its imported corn from the United States.

Government Orders

Here is another factor. Corn is energy and water intensive and is a highly polluting crop to grow. We have to be honest about this. It requires large amounts of fertilizer, pesticides and fuel to grow, harvest and dry, not to mention transport. It contributes to soil erosion and water pollution. It is a major cause of nitrogen runoff, which can create oxygen-starved dead zones in our water bodies, an extremely important issue for Canada.

Some people are concerned that the increased use of E85 as a motor fuel may lead to increased smog and health effects, but there I do not think the research is conclusive.

Sometimes when farmers rush to convert to or increase the production of corn or sugar cane or other crops for ethanol, there is a fear that the conversion of forests or wilderness to farmland will not only harm biodiversity but may negatively affect the net greenhouse gas reductions of ethanol use.

Even with major increases in ethanol production, ethanol is an expensive drop in the bucket in terms of reducing overall emissions. It is an expensive per tonne process to reduce our greenhouse gases. That is why cellulosic ethanol, which is often called second generation technology ethanol and uses waste material and switch-grass, et cetera, offers the real hope for significant reductions in GHG emissions.

Corn based ethanol has a net positive effect, I believe, but is not holding out the same promise. I think the government ought to be putting forward a policy where everything possible that can be done to direct the industry toward the next generation of ethanol development should happen if we really want the environmental benefits without as many drawbacks.

Yet there is another angle that deserves to be raised, and that is the incoherence between the government's purported 5% ethanol content regulation and what it is actually doing when it comes to taxation policy for these very fuels.

On April 1, just two months from now, the government will repeal the excise tax exemption for biodiesel and ethanol fuels. We know the effect of the repeal on low level blends is small, and maybe even minimal, but we know the additional taxes are substantial for higher blends. The price of what they call B50, for example, will increase by 2¢ a litre. The price of E85 will increase dramatically, by 8.5¢ a litre, hardly making the fuel competitive.

The tax increases come at a time when this early stage industry needs traction to establish a foothold in Canada's refueling market. There are 31 vehicle models today on the road in the Canadian market, 31 different kinds of vehicles that can use E85, but there are only two full-fledged E85 retail stations in the country compared to 1,200 in the United States.

Higher level blends are better for the environment than lower level blends. So what does the government do? It removes the tax subsidy, thereby driving up the cost of the substitute so that it is not competitive in the market at the retail stations and in fact pricing it over the \$120 oil, as we have seen through analysis.

On this side of the House, we are really having a hard time reconciling how these two actually connect. In fact, we do not think they do at all. We think that the Minister of Finance took a decision

on this particular excise tax exemption without talking to his colleague, the Minister of the Environment, who obviously did not talk to his colleague, the Minister of Agriculture, all of this in a government that purports to have a special cabinet committee where energy, environment and the economy come together. We are trying to figure out how they do come together.

• (1650)

My colleague, the member for Newton—North Delta, who is the official opposition critic for competitiveness and the new economy, has been raising this issue now for some months. It is falling on deaf ears with the government. He is trying to reconcile, for example, how a major company in his own riding or close to it, Cascadia Biofuels, has cancelled its plans to become the first retailer of E85 ethanol in B.C. because it is now going to be unaffordable to sell. What kind of market incentive are we creating?

In my own riding of Ottawa South, the largest single manufacturer of enzymes to produce cellulosic ethanol, Iogen Corporation, located just 30 or 40 blocks from here, is now getting very worried about the production processes and the ultimate costing of ethanol in Canada, more particularly in my home province of Ontario, where the provincial government in its wisdom set a 10% standard there as opposed to a meeker and less ambitious 5%.

For Canadians, all of this has to be seen in the context of climate change policy. Let us take a look, as the parliamentary secretary suggested, at the climate change policy of the government. Let us see where it is actually at today.

First of all, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change told the government, all parliamentarians and all Canadians that we need to contain temperature increases to between 2° and 2.4° if possible. We will only be able to do that, it says, if we stabilize emissions within 15 years and cut them in half by 2050. We have to stabilize in 15 years and cut emissions in half by 2050 or we play Russian roulette with the atmosphere. That is the choice. The IPCC has told us.

It reminds me of the old advertisement on television for FRAM oil filters. The first shot was of a mechanic standing at the window who was saying "you can pay me now for your oil filter", while the next shot was the car being wheeled in, obviously broken down, with the mechanic saying "or you can pay me later". This is what we are talking about when we talk about a functioning atmosphere: pay now or pay later.

The Stern review, conducted by the former chief economist at the World Bank on the economics of climate change, said that the costs of ignoring climate change would be 5% to 20% of GDP, more than the cost of two world wars and the Great Depression combined. In contrast, the cost of tackling the problem now can be limited to 1% of global GDP, if we act now.

Government Orders

The IPCC report also says there are already many effective low-cost options available to developed countries like Canada to reduce greenhouse gases: financial incentives, and we have just talked about one, the excise fuel tax; deploying existing technologies; tradeable permits and carbon credits, something missing from the government's climate change plan; renewable power investments, cut since the government came to power; and voluntary programs.

Here is another study. Just four months ago, McKinsey & Company, the largest and most respected management consulting firm in the world, showed that a great deal could be achieved in the fight against climate change without placing an undue burden on the economy if governments were to provide incentives for the development and deployment of green technologies. The study concludes that the annual worldwide costs for making the needed emissions reductions to avoid worse climate change is only 0.6% of that year's projected GDP in 2030.

I could go on. The litany of failure on the government's climate change plan has now been well detailed by the C.D. Howe Institute, Deutsche Bank, the Pembina Institute and the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research and the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, the Conservative government's own board, have told the government its plan is baseless and will not achieve their targets in any way. In fact, not a single third party observer has put forward a shred of evidence to substantiate that its plan will work.

• (1655)

Once again, we see the government's incoherence. The Environment Minister, the Finance Minister and the Agriculture Minister do not speak to each other because they could not even get a basic policy straight as a subset of the climate change plan, a plan which has now been widely discredited throughout Canadian society.

Those are my remarks. I welcome any questions and comments from my colleagues.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-33 is one of those bills which, for some of us members of Parliament who have sat in opposition in the past for far too long, we are now very happy to be on the government side to see brought forward. This is one of those bills about which I, together with other rural caucus members, talked to the Prime Minister, the Finance Minister, the Environment Minister and the Agriculture Minister.

I know that all members of the government, including the Prime Minister and the cabinet, are committed to working on ways to lower carbon dioxide emissions, but also to give a new market to our agricultural producers in this country. Certainly, Bill C-33 would do that. The bill would take some massive steps in reducing carbon emissions.

I listened to my Liberal colleague across the way. He actually started out pretty good. He recognized some of the positive things that the bill would do. I hope that he will support the bill. Then he started talking about the negative. He spoke about what they should have done and what we should have done. It just comes back to, why did the Liberals not move in this direction when they were on this side of the House?

The hon. member has been all over the map. First, he said that we have said we will regulate 5% biodiesel or 5% renewable fuel by 2010. However, he challenged us to accept the Liberals' benchmark of 10%. Then he said that this regulatory decision to make it 5% has caused other crops to skyrocket in price. He then said that the increased cost in food is a huge cost to the poorest in the world, but he wanted to go to 10%.

It is not just that the Liberals did nothing when they were on this side, even in the member's speech the member said that we went to 5%, but we should have gone to 10%. However, going to 5% will raise the cost of the other crops.

I am from a rural constituency and I am very pleased to see that other crops are starting to have more value. I am pleased to see that canola is now \$12 or \$13 a bushel and that wheat is finally taking off again.

I have a question for the hon. member. Is he opposed to the increase in commodity prices for the other grains?

Mr. David McGuinty: Mr. Speaker, I suppose all I can say to begin is that the member was not listening. I tried to set out for Canadians the merits of some of the tough choices we will have to make as a country: choosing one form of ethanol over another form of ethanol.

I said that this government is meek in its understanding of making intelligent choices for the 21st century to drive our investments into the field of cellulosic ethanol as opposed to corn ethanol. I said to the member that this is an incoherent announcement that does not connect to the climate change plan, which has been widely discredited. I am waiting for a shred of evidence to suggest otherwise.

Let us talk a little bit about what we did and what we did not do. While the Prime Minister was denying even the existence of climate change for nine years, on record, four increasingly aggressive climate change plans were brought into place by two governments on this side of the House, culminating in project green launched in 2005 less than eight months after our leader became the environment minister.

The Pembina Institute has said that project green was over six times more effective than what the government has so far offered to date. We put in large scale funding for alternative energy. We invested in biofuels. We conducted a highly successful public awareness campaign to teach Canadians about the dangers of global warming while our Prime Minister was fundraising to block the ratification of the Kyoto protocol, describing it as a socialist, money-sucking scheme.

It is very rich for a government member to stand here and defend a climate change plan which so far meets with no success, none whatsoever, so I am finding it a little bit difficult to rise to the question.

Government Orders

• (1700)

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to go back to some of the comments that the hon. made about cellulosic ethanol and it being the panacea. Do we not really need to have some principles attached to these very large subsidy programs that may allow development of one or the other technology that focuses the subsidy in a direction that would lead people in the future to produce cellulosic ethanol or grain that can be used for protein as well?

There are a variety of better options within the biofuel industry that should be promoted. When we have a subsidy that is set out for simply the production of ethanol, we need to have these kinds of differentiations within the programs that we support to make people move in the right directions. Is this what the hon. member across the way is getting at?

Mr. David McGuinty: Mr. Speaker, that is precisely what I am getting at and precisely what I think we need to do. What we need from the government is a proper evaluation of what choices we are making and why. Let me illustrate in practical terms for Canadians.

The government brought in a tax deductible transit pass. Here is what we know about a tax deductible transit pass. We know that the Minister of Finance was told by his own officials not to do it. We know that the economic analysis backstopping the measure said the cost was too expensive per tonne of greenhouse gases reduced. It was about \$1,800 per tonne of greenhouse gases reduced using the tax deductible transit pass.

That is not intelligent hockey. That is not a proper allocation of scarce public resources. That is not good economic policy and it is not good environmental policy, but we see it right through this whole announcement in choices that are being made. Where was the evidence to support investing \$1 billion-plus in this, over \$1 billion-plus in that? It is not put forward. I am not even sure if the numbers have been crunched.

The member is precisely right and I would like to thank him for raising it. Those are the questions that I think have to be raised in committee.

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick (Prince Albert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I heard the member's comment about cellulosic ethanol and it is my recollection in last year's budget that \$180 million was targeted for the cellulosic ethanol operation that he mentioned in his riding, Iogen, to build the first commercial plant in Canada, fortunately in Saskatchewan, my home province.

However, the member referred to it as being an incoherent policy, that we are just emphasizing grain-based ethanol. Is the member suggesting today that the \$180 million funding for the Iogen project to move ahead is a one-sided, incoherent strategy?

Mr. David McGuinty: Mr. Speaker, absolutely not. I fought hard and supported the request for support for Iogen Corporation to pilot, to groundtruth, and to set up exactly the kind of plant that we should be setting up. What is incoherent is how any of these connect.

What about the plant in the riding of the member from Cornwall? How does that connect with this one? What about the actual removal of the excise fuel tax, the exemption, the exception? How is that going to have a bearing on pricing in the marketplace? These things

are all connected, but unfortunately, I am still looking to see how it is coherent.

It certainly is not coherent, if I may share with the hon. member, with the climate change plan that absolutely no one believes. It was not believed domestically and it was completely rejected internationally.

In fact, it was so bad internationally, the Minister of the Environment, who was scheduled to give a speech to 100 international dignitaries and the media, skipped out three minutes before it was to take place. He did not come and present it at all. We do not know where he was. If he is that proud of it, maybe he should come to the House and defend it more regularly.

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak this evening to Bill C-33, An Act to amend the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999 to provide for the efficient regulation of fuels. It allows the minister to regulate the content of fuels. The Bloc Québécois is in favour of the principle of this bill. We obviously want to examine it in more detail in committee.

I am nonetheless surprised to hear the government this evening. It is as though it were presenting the seventh wonder of the world. This Conservative government thinks this bill represents a shiny new energy policy, agriculture policy, and greenhouse gas reduction policy, but it is nothing more than an administrative measure that addresses some of our concerns. That is why, as I was saying, we support the principle.

We want—and everyone agrees on this—to increasingly reduce our dependence on oil. Maybe some people do not want that, but we certainly do. We also want an effort to be made in the transportation sector in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote the use of agricultural and wood waste products. Some hon. members have mentioned certain pilot plants as far as cellulose ethanol is concerned. An increasing number of projects are being implemented. During this speech I will take the opportunity to talk about what is going on in my region in particular. You will understand why when I do.

The government has already announced that it will implement a regulation requiring fuel to contain an average of 5% renewable fuels by 2010. Regulations will also require diesel and fuel-oil to contain an average of 2% renewable fuels by 2012. We know that the Government of Quebec intends to have gasoline contain 5% ethanol by 2012. It has invested \$6.5 million in building two demonstration plants for cellulose ethanol production in the Eastern Townships, not far from my riding.

The cellulose ethanol process promotes the use of agricultural residues, such as straw, and forestry residues, such as wood chips, trees and fast growing grasses. This could be an excellent opportunity for the agricultural and forestry sectors, which desperately need additional sources of revenue.

Government Orders

Such a project is underway in the Bromptonville area, in Sherbrooke. I know the area well. Indeed, during my first election campaign, the former municipality of Bromptonville, which amalgamated with Sherbrooke, was in the Richmond—Arthabaska riding. The pilot plant or pilot project involved the Kruger forestry company, located in the area. The second project is still in the Eastern Townships, in Westbury, where the residues from table making are turned into ethanol. It is still in the early stages, but it is a path worth exploring further in terms of these kinds of projects.

The Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food also had the opportunity to meet with the managers of an Ottawa-based business, Iogen Corporation. Some members have mentioned other plants elsewhere in Canada. These people built a pilot plant that has been producing cellulosic ethanol for a few years now. The process is not yet “profitable”, although I think it is a profitable venture anytime we do something to reduce our oil dependency. For now, this is very much still in the experimental stage, but this is a very promising new form of energy.

The biofuel industry is also becoming increasingly important. Moreover, under new regulations, some cattle farmers are left with specified risk materials, or SRMs, that are worth nothing at this time and they must pay to dispose of them. It would be beneficial for these farmers to be able to send these materials to biodiesel plants so they could be turned into fuel.

I know that the Fédération des producteurs de bovins du Québec is already asking the federal government for assistance to conduct a market study, at the very least, to determine whether constructing a biodiesel plant would be feasible. It would be a very good idea for the federal government to listen to the representations of the Fédération des producteurs de bovins du Québec regarding this issue. Indeed, a very profitable market could be developed. Of course, all animal oils, all animal product residues, could eventually be turned into biofuel.

• (1710)

Earlier I said that I would provide examples from my riding. My hometown is known as the cradle of sustainable development. This is even written on the signs. In my area, the late Normand Maurice was known as the father of recycling. Recycling started in Victoriaville, in central Quebec. We are very proud of that. The city is the cradle of sustainable development. We fulfilled our desire to take sustainable development even further by converting the city's 35 trucks to run on biodiesel. In Victoriaville, the foremen are already driving around in hybrids. This example gives an idea of the philosophy of my region. All the other vehicles run on ethanol fuel. Biodiesel comes from vegetable oils, animal fats and used frying oils.

In Victoriaville, the Centre de formation en entreprise et récupération, or CFER, was responsible for an interesting partnership. Normand Maurice, whom I mentioned earlier, created the CFERs in Quebec. In the beginning, there was only the one centre in Victoriaville. There are now 17 throughout Quebec. Young people with learning difficulties learn to work as part of a team in a plant. Now, CFERs are specialized in recycling all kinds of materials, including cellular phones or anything Hydro-Québec no longer uses, from wires to lamp posts. A recycled paint plant was even opened in

Victoriaville. It belonged to the CFER, but is now independent. They are still together, but thanks to them, a whole new industry was developed. The CFER is what started all of this. Pioneers like Normand Maurice and Yves Couture, the current director of the CFER in Victoriaville, have made it possible for these young people to learn job skills, and most of them to find jobs. Of course, all the projects aim to promote public awareness about the importance of recycling.

In addition to the CFER, this project accommodates the Centre de formation Vision 20-20, which is a school, and Peinture récupérée du Québec, about which I have already spoken. Together, they decided to set up a used vegetable oil recovery and treatment project to produce biodiesel. At present, about ten Victoriaville restaurants provide the vegetable oil. We already have a pharmacy delivery vehicle that uses the biodiesel. The vehicle was modified and has a biodiesel reservoir. This entire project is branching out.

That is not all. Victoriaville is also home to the Institut national de la recherche scientifique, INRS, which is interested in the sludge from Victoriaville's water treatment plant. Apparently we have good sludge. I do not know much about the different qualities of sludge but one thing is for sure: the INRS believes that Victoriaville's sludge could be useful in the future. One day, it could be processed into biofuel. That is a scientific possibility. It could also be turned into biopesticides, detergent for the agriculture sector or paper mills, and microbial additives for treating wastewater from the agri-food sector, among others.

To close, I would like to point out that the INRS plans to open in Quebec City, in the near future, an agricultural, industrial and urban waste bioconversion laboratory that will be a pilot project. A small idea has taken off and I have only talked about what is happening in my riding. Every MP who has spoken has been able to give a few interesting examples of the strides taken in developing alternatives to traditional fuels. Everything I have spoken about can be found in Victoriaville's newspapers. The local media have kept the citizens informed. In my opinion, these are projects that could be replicated in other regions.

There are some very interesting possibilities with regard to the production of biofuels, but we still do not have large-scale production. As I mentioned, in many cases, things are still at the experimental stage. Unfortunately, we are still dependent on oil.

• (1715)

The Bloc Québécois put forward a plan to reduce our oil dependency. The government would do well to go along with our plan rather than believe that introducing an administrative bill will fix everything. The government should go along with this plan instead of giving mind-boggling tax cuts to big oil companies. If I am not mistaken, this year alone, the government gave \$922 million to big oil companies that certainly do not need the money. Everyone knows this, so I will leave it at that.

Government Orders

I want to emphasize that Quebec could reduce its dependency on oil by half within 10 years. One way to reach that goal is to reduce the amount of oil used in gasoline. That is one way to reduce our oil dependency. However, we will not be able to reach that goal if the Conservative government continues to shoot down Quebec's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

As we all know, not long ago this government thought that the whole climate change issue was a socialist plot and that global warming was not really happening. Representatives of this government have been hard at work on the international scene sabotaging the efforts of countries that want to do what has to be done to reduce greenhouse gases.

Contrary to what we heard earlier, this bill will not solve the problem. We agree that we need much stricter solutions. For example, we could demand absolute targets, particularly for big oil companies. We could do the same for transportation. We could also set up a carbon exchange. There has been enough talk here and in the public arena to realize that while some countries are taking action, our government is, unfortunately, asleep at the wheel when it comes to environmental issues.

Among other things, the federal government should take action within its jurisdiction to table a bill requiring auto manufacturers to improve the fuel consumption of all road vehicles sold in Quebec by 20% within 10 years. That kind of bill would be interesting.

Unfortunately, Bill C-33, which is currently before us, does not go that far. All it does is allow the minister to regulate the content of fuels.

The committee will have to look at this very closely to figure out exactly what the government is trying to accomplish with this bill. For example, we want to know if the government intends to copy our American neighbours' energy system development strategy.

It is important to understand that Canada will never be able to copy the United States, which heavily subsidizes its grain producers through the Farm Bill. The U.S. also heavily subsidizes ethanol plants. The American government pays 50¢ of the cost of producing a gallon of ethanol. If we do the math, we see that the U.S. is currently producing 12 billion gallons of ethanol, which means \$6 billion in subsidies. The Americans' goal is to produce 36 billion gallons of ethanol in the relatively short term. Subsidies in the U.S. are staggering.

Clearly, Canada will not be able to go that route. We would like to know what the Conservative government's policy is on this. The minister did not make any mention of it in his speech this evening.

We need to know the federal government's real strategy for developing the energy system, if it has a policy. That remains to be seen.

To date, the government has talked a good game. Some steps are being taken—and we agree with them, of course—to promote certain biofuel plants. But as I said earlier, we will not give this government a blank cheque based on its environmental record. That is out of the question. This government's responsibility for the sustainability of agriculture in Canada will not disappear with this bill, even though it does promote the use of biofuels.

As I said, we need to be increasingly aware of new fuels. It is important to study all the environmental impacts of introducing and using biofuels. That is why it will be very interesting to hear the explanations and testimony in committee about the actions the government wants to take.

• (1720)

[*English*]

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciated the member's speech. I have two questions for him.

At the end of his speech, he talked about the subsidies given to the agricultural industry in the United States and how they hurt Canadian farmers. Would the member comment on how effective the government has been in trying to convince the United States and Europe to stop harmful subsidies, which are hurting our farmers so much?

The second question I have is related to the types of ethanol and from what they are produced. At a Canadian Renewable Fuels Association reception last night, I talked to some of its major officials, and they are always very helpful. I commend that organization for the lobbying it has done over the years for renewable fuels. The officials explained how ethanol production was moving more and more away from using the actual food part of the corn and using only the rest of the product. The Liberals have made a great deal of mention today to the use of cellulose.

If the emphasis, motivation and incentive is toward producing a type of ethanol from fuels that will not hurt fuel production, how is this incorporated in the bill?

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Speaker, I did not see that in the bill. However, the reason we are insisting on hearing about it in committee and inviting more and more witnesses is precisely in order to fully explore the matter, to determine the government's direction in terms of its policies concerning energy and the use of renewable fuels. As I was saying, we hear the government saying that this bill will revolutionize the planet, but, in reality, it is a much more administrative measure. There are some promising features, however. Of course, we must shed full light on the matter, as we do for each and every bill that comes before us.

As for subsidies, it must be understood that Canada, which is supposed to be a major player on the world stage when it comes to agriculture and agrifood, has been described—and I am not the one who said it—by many associations, federations and farmers' unions as a boy scout compared to other countries that constantly give huge subsidies to their farmers. This is definitely the case in the European Union and the United States.

WTO negotiations are currently underway in Geneva and it seems that none of those countries wants to make any concessions. Canada, on the other hand, must put its foot down and assert its rights.

*Government Orders**[English]*

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for giving us his point of view, especially when he spoke to the larger issues of energy policy, where much of this has to fit into the design of a green energy future for Canada and for Quebec.

One of the largest debates in Quebec right now is about the importation liquefied natural gas to the province. It is my understanding the Bloc has not taken the position of opposing this. Natural gas is used for space heating. Biomass energy and biological fuels can be used as well for the same purpose.

Is there not a higher quality in developing green energy in Canada for the use by Quebecers over the importation of a potentially very expensive form of energy from places like Russia and Qatar?

• (1725)

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Speaker, I thought it was rather clear in my speech that promoting the use of renewable energy is completely consistent with sustainable development. This is what Quebec has been wanting for a long time.

Earlier, I heard one of my colleagues give some examples of what Manitoba and other provinces with rather interesting renewable energy policies are doing.

It is always very important to keep developing these types of products instead of importing gas or other energies. That is obvious. However, as I said earlier, we must understand that biofuels and all the new technologies are still in the experimental stage. We cannot wake up one day and say that we are changing our production and that we are using only such-and-such a product to fulfill or meet our needs, in the industries, in the transportation sector, or elsewhere. If we do nothing, we will certainly remain dependent on oil and other expensive energies. However, if we are smart and keep investing the necessary money and implementing the necessary policies, while still respecting the importance of sustainable development, we will clearly be able to wean ourselves off these very expensive energies at some point.

[English]

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my esteemed colleague from the Bloc is the vice-chair of the agriculture committee and is very learned on this topic. We enjoy a great relationship while working on issues that are important to farmers across the country.

He talked about other types of biofuels and biomass. Outside of Montreal, Rothsay has a biodiesel plant that is based upon using animal byproducts, the fats from rendered product, to make biodiesel. It has proven to be extremely successful. I can see that business expanding across the country thanks to the good work at its plant outside of Montreal.

Iogen, just outside of Ottawa, has been working on developing cellulose ethanol and is getting further down the line to seeing that technology commercialized. This will also provide another marketplace for our agriculture producers, whether it is waste coming out of livestock yards, or the straw left out in the fields after harvest, or making use of things like wood chips from the pulp and paper

industry or the lumber industry. There is an opportunity to take waste material and turn it into a valuable product.

I am glad my esteemed colleague has made the intervention outlining the fact that those benefits are there for agriculture as well, on top of this great new story for all farmers across the country.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Speaker, that is not really a question but rather a compliment for my speech. Many thanks to my colleague, whom I hold in high regard as well.

He is quite right. As the chair of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, he is passionate about the evolution of agriculture; however, we do not always agree on everything. He feels the same way and therefore it is mutual.

There are definitely very interesting prospects for cellulose ethanol—as he just said—and all types of residue. This would benefit not only the agricultural sector but the forestry sector as well. What do we currently do with residue and animal waste? We throw them out. Often we even have to pay to dispose of them.

At some point, if it becomes possible to recycle this type of waste into biofuel, everyone will win.

* * *

[English]

SETTLEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT DISPUTES ACT

The House resumed from January 29 consideration of the motion that Bill C-9, An Act to implement the Convention on the Settlement of Investment Disputes between States and Nationals of Other States (ICSID Convention), be read the third time and passed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): It being 5:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion at the third reading stage of Bill C-9.

Call in the members.

• (1755)

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

(Division No. 31)

YEAS

Members

Abbott	Ablonczy
Albrecht	Alghabra
Allen	Allison
Ambrose	Anders
Anderson	André
Asselin	Bachand
Bagnell	Bains
Barbot	Barnes
Batters	Beaumier
Bélangier	Bellavance
Bennett	Benoit
Bernier	Bevilacqua
Bezan	Bigras
Blackburn	Blais
Boshcoff	Bouchard
Boucher	Bourgeois

Breitkreuz
Brown (Oakville)
Brown (Barrie)
Brunelle
Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country)
Cannon (Pontiac)
Carrie
Casson
Chong
Coderre
Cotler
Cullen (Etobicoke North)
Davidson
DeBellefeuille
Demers
Devolin
Dhalla
Dosanjh
Dryden
Dykstra
Emerson
Eyking
Fast
Fitzpatrick
Fletcher
Freeman
Galipeau
Godfrey
Goodale
Gourde
Grewal
Guay
Hanger
Harris
Heam
Hill
Holland
Ignatieff
Jean
Kadis
Karetak-Lindell
Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Kotto
Laforest
Lauzon
Lebel
Lee
Lemieux
Lévesque
Lunn
Lussier
MacKay (Central Nova)
Malhi
Maloney
Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca)
Mayes
McGuinty
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
Ménard (Hochelaga)
Menzies
Miller
Minna
Moore (Fundy Royal)
Murphy (Charlottetown)
Neville
Norlock
Obhrai
Ouellet
Pallister
Paradis
Pearson
Petit
Poilievre
Preston
Rajotte
Redman
Reid
Ritz
Roy
Savage
Schellenberger
Sgro
Silva

Brisson
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Bruinooge
Calkins
Cannis
Cardin
Carrier
Chan
Clement
Comuzzi
Crête
Cummins
Day
Dei Mastro
Deschamps
Dhaliwal
Dion
Doyle
Duceppe
Easter
Epp
Faille
Finley
Flaherty
Folco
Gagnon
Gallant
Goldring
Goodyear
Gravel
Guarnieri
Guimond
Harper
Hawn
Hiebert
Hinton
Hubbard
Jaffer
Jennings
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Karygiannis
Keeper
Komarnicki
Kram (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lake
Lavallée
LeBlanc
Lemay
Lessard
Lukowski
Lunney
MacAulay
MacKenzie
Malo
Manning
Matthews
McCallum
McGuire
McTeague
Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin)
Merrifield
Mills
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe)
Nadeau
Nicholson
O'Connor
Oda
Pacetti
Paquette
Patry
Perron
Plamondon
Prentice
Proulx
Ratansi
Regan
Richardson
Rota
Russell
Scarpaleggia
Scott
Shiple
Simard

Simms
Smith
Sorenson
St-Hilaire
St. Denis
Steckle
Strahl
Szabo
Temelkovski
Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques)
Thibault (West Nova)
Thompson (New Brunswick Southwest)
Toews
Trost
Tweed
Van Kesteren
Vellacott
Vincent
Warawa
Watson
Wrzesnewskyj
Zed- — 241

Private Members' Business

Skelton
Solberg
St-Cyr
St. Amand
Stanton
Storseth
Sweet
Telegdi
Thi Lac
Tilson
Tonks
Turner
Valley
Van Loan
Verner
Wallace
Warkentin
Wilfert
Yelich

NAYS

Members

Angus
Bell (Vancouver Island North)
Black
Charlton
Christopherson
Davies
Godin
Layton
Martin (Sault Ste. Marie)
Mathyssen
Nash
Savoie
Stoffer
Atamanenko
Bevington
Blaikie
Chow
Comartin
Dewar
Julian
Martin (Winnipeg Centre)
Masse
McDonough
Priddy
Siksay
Wasylcia-Leis- — 26

PAIRED

Members

Baird
Bonsant
Guergis
Laframboise
Mark
Picard
Blaney
Gaudet
Harvey
Lalonde
Mourani
Thompson (Wild Rose)- — 12

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I declare the motion carried.

(Bill read the third time and passed)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): It being 5:58 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

● (1800)

[Translation]

OLD AGE SECURITY PROGRAM

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, Ind.) moved:

Private Members' Business

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should review the Old Age Security program with a view to: (a) reduce the program's operational costs by ceasing to pay benefits that subsequently have to be repaid; (b) allocate these savings first to single, divorced and widowed Guaranteed Income Savings recipients, specifically to people who did not have an opportunity to prepare for their retirement; (c) improve the Guaranteed Income Savings benefits for elderly single, divorced and widowed individuals; and (d) increase the other income threshold so that Guaranteed Income Savings recipients may receive the equivalent of 15 hours per week of work at minimum wage in their province of residence without penalty.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I am proud and moved to open the debate today on an issue that is very important to me, on behalf of thousands of seniors in my region, in my riding, in Quebec and in Canada. I am talking about having a decent guaranteed income supplement worthy of its name.

I would like to begin by thanking the hon. member for London North Centre for agreeing to second my motion. I chose this hon. colleague because he is fine man with a deep sense of common good and social justice. I am sorry I cannot speak his name.

This debate is necessary and urgent because it addresses the financial situation of low income seniors, which has been critical for far too long now and has had a serious impact on many aspects of their lives. A quarter of a million seniors live in poverty and the majority are single women. This deplorable situation includes seniors who are receiving the maximum guaranteed income supplement benefit and those who are eligible to receive it but are not aware of that fact.

I took the initiative to start a petition in support of this motion and I collected 7,000 signatures from people all across eastern Quebec, from La Pocatière to the Magdalen Islands and even from New Brunswick, who approved the timing of this motion. This shows that people, seniors or not, recognize the merits of this motion and, accordingly, the need for elected members of this House to make it clear to the government that something needs to be done about this right away.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Paquette from the Carrefour des 50 ans et plus in eastern Quebec, all the members of the affiliated clubs and all the people who signed the petition.

It is unacceptable and shameful of the government to allow thousands of seniors to live below the low-income cutoff, which is just a euphemism for poverty line. They are living in extreme poverty. These people are suffering greatly and it is time to do something about it.

The motion I am presenting calls on the government to review the old age security program to ensure that our seniors are getting adequate benefits. The motion is divided into four parts.

First, it involves reducing the program's operational costs by ceasing to pay benefits that subsequently have to be repaid. In my view, this is only logical.

Second, the motion aims to allocate these savings first to single, divorced and widowed guaranteed income supplement recipients, specifically to people who did not have an opportunity to prepare for their retirement. Indeed, many of our seniors are in this position.

Third, it involves improving the guaranteed income supplement benefits for those same recipients, those I just mentioned above.

Fourth, the motion aims to increase the other income threshold so that guaranteed income supplement recipients may receive the equivalent of 15 hours per week of work at minimum wage in their province of residence without penalty.

I would now like to explain these four points one by one.

The first has to do with the fact that thousands of people aged 65 and older receive old age security benefits, which are often referred to as the "old age pension", and pay it back in full when they file their income taxes. According to Statistics Canada 234,623 recipients had to repay a portion of their pension in 2006. Of that number, 47,334 had to pay it back in full or nearly in full. The reality is that seniors who have a gross annual revenue of \$103,000 or more do not really need a taxable monthly pension of \$500.

• (1805)

Although I know that some members of this House do not want this aspect of the old age security program to be called into question, I personally believe that the money saved should be used to increase guaranteed income supplement payments for people who are currently living below the poverty line—well below the poverty line.

The second point raised in my motion concerns the costs of running the old age security program. I am talking about the costs associated with managing overpayments, which cost the government and therefore taxpayers a great deal of money. In her 2006 report, the Auditor General indicated that old age security overpayments totalled \$82 million as of March 31, 2005. She also stated that recipients who had not yet repaid their overpayments were continuing to receive benefits. These overpayments are sometimes the result of file processing errors. They are not necessarily due to fraud.

In the same report, the Auditor General said that the quality of application processing is not adequately monitored and that 9% of applications showed quality deficiencies. That created payment errors amounting to 0.6% of the total amount of benefits, which is \$27.9 billion, as I am sure my colleagues know. If we do the math, we get \$167 million, which is no small amount. I am asking that the money the government saves by putting an end to many of the overpayments be used to increase guaranteed income supplement payments for poor seniors.

The third part of my motion is crystal clear: "improve the guaranteed income supplement benefits for elderly single, divorced and widowed individuals", meaning people who live alone. Why? Because essentials such as rent, heating, electricity, basic telephone service, cable, essential travel—I am not talking about vacation travel—and food cost as much for a person living alone as for a couple, and sometimes even more.

The situation of single seniors who receive the guaranteed income supplement, and mainly those who receive the maximum, is nothing short of disastrous. These individuals are thousands of dollars below the poverty line. For example, in my riding, recipients of combined benefits—old age security and the guaranteed income supplement—receive \$14,000 whereas the poverty line is \$18,000. They have a shortfall of \$4,000. What about recipients who live in major centres where the poverty line may be \$22,000, \$24,000 or \$27,000? The shortfall is greater. These individuals are living in extreme poverty and that has to change.

It also has to be said that although both men and women are caught in this deplorable situation, it is women—particularly the oldest—who are more often the victims of this poverty. Many of these women were unable to pay into pension plans because of their role as housewives, a very noble role indeed. All women who worked at home, often with their spouses—farm wives, for example—did not earn an income and thus could not contribute to a public pension plan.

Furthermore, speaking of women, we know that they have a greater life expectancy: 82.5 years for women compared to 77.7 for men. These women who live in poverty will be subjected to these conditions for a longer period of time. I believe that everyone in this House will acknowledge that this is shameful.

● (1810)

It is unacceptable and the government must take action to correct this situation.

I must point out that this situation still exists despite the improvements various successive governments have agreed to make over the years, mainly—let us face it—because of social pressures and the work of the opposition to increase the guaranteed income supplement and facilitate the process somewhat.

Our seniors are still living in poverty and are being kept in poverty because of unfair provisions. We must eradicate poverty among seniors—and the government has the means to do so—with a system that respects dignity and that everyone can get behind. This social value has been embraced out of respect for our seniors. The token amount they are being given right now does not reflect their contribution to society.

My fourth request asks the government to increase the level of other income permissible in order to allow recipients of the guaranteed income supplement, who so desire, to work 15 hours a week at the minimum wage of the province they live in, without penalty. We know that currently, a claimant's guaranteed income supplement is decreased for any earnings over and above \$24. This is absolutely ridiculous.

Research has shown that people 65 and older who wish to continue working do so for far less than minimum wage. People 65 and older do want to keep working. They are often recruited during peak periods in sales sectors, agriculture, agri-food and tourism. Some of these people that I meet tell me that they are practically encouraged to work under the table. It is not right for a government to penalize honest people who are simply trying to have a decent life.

Private Members' Business

On the subject of the incomes of seniors, the framework prepared in 2005 by the Committee of Officials for Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors is telling:

—income is one of the most important health determinants and the basis of an individual's ability to access appropriate housing and transportation required to maintain independence; nutritious and sufficient food to maintain health; and non-insured medical services and supports such as medication and home support.

Income is an important determinant when it comes to poverty. If we really want to help our seniors live better, this is where we must start.

In conclusion, through this motion, and this goes without saying, I am inviting all parliamentarians to join me in calling on the government to seriously and actively deal with the issue of poverty among seniors, particularly seniors living alone. The situation is critical. The government, and each elected member in this House, must be guided by values that focus on the common good, and the government is responsible for redistributing our collective wealth. All I ask is that our seniors be able to live with dignity. They helped build our society. We owe them this.

I have suggested realistic solutions. I will leave it up to the government to decide how to implement them. This is why I chose to move a motion instead of introducing a bill, knowing full well that it is rare for a member's bill to receive royal assent if it requires the government to incur expenses. For the sake of our seniors, I hope that each member in this House will think carefully and ethically about this, and that a majority will vote in favour of this motion.

● (1815)

[*English*]

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I really appreciate that this motion is before the House because there are few issues that are more pressing than the income needs of seniors, particularly the most vulnerable seniors in our communities.

I know that the member spoke very eloquently about the needs in particular of senior women in our communities. When they are living alone, they do experience much higher rates of poverty than any other segment of the senior population. I know that is true in Hamilton. I certainly know it is true in my riding of Hamilton Mountain, yet there is a section in the motion that I find kind of awkward.

When we talk about elderly, single, divorced and widowed individuals, that section to me gives the impression that we are advocating that government benefits, as essential as the GIS, are being allocated based on marital status.

I would like to think that the wording is as it is in that motion simply because that is how the actual legislation deals with people who are single and living alone, and that we are not actually supporting this distinction based on marital status. I just wonder whether the member could elaborate as to what her intent is and whether she is indeed just copying the language of the bill.

Private Members' Business

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her question. Obviously, I hope she will support this motion. She is absolutely right. The only reason I used the language I did is that it is important to respect the administrative language, the language used in the legislation.

My goal in introducing this motion is to help single people. We all know that typically, this affects older women—much older women. I am not just saying this because I am a woman.

I am just using the existing language. The member can be sure that I did not intend to reveal or hide anything.

Mr. Raymond Gravel (Repentigny, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques because the subject of seniors is very important to me. I, too, am here to work for seniors.

I would like my colleague to clarify two points. First, the motion specifies “single”, “widowed” and “divorced” people, but it should also include “separated” people. Perhaps these people have been forgotten because they constitute a different group.

My other question has to do with the program's operational costs mentioned in the motion:

(a) reduce the program's operational costs by ceasing to pay benefits that subsequently have to be repaid;

How much are these operational costs estimated to be? If part (a) is rejected, then part (b) will automatically be dropped. I think it would be deplorable if funds were not redirected to the recipients of the guaranteed income supplement.

I would like some clarification on these points.

●(1820)

Ms. Louise Thibault: Mr. Speaker, to my knowledge, when we worked on the wording, we used the three terms that were there. Obviously, if “separated” needs to be added, I would be happy to do so. There was no moral dimension in the words used in the motion. I really meant people who live alone.

As for the operational costs, we are talking about several million dollars. This is why I would like to see that money redistributed, of course, as I said, so that those who really need it can benefit from it. In my view, it is completely unacceptable that people who do not need the pension at all receive it.

The question of overpayments and managing the program is a major issue. We are spending ridiculous amounts of money to manage incompetence. That must be corrected. Generally speaking, the government is very stingy. When it is spending money to help our seniors, it must ensure that this money goes to the right people.

I thank my hon. colleague for his question.

[English]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for raising this issue in the House today. My colleague, like every member in the House, cares deeply about seniors and seniors' issues, especially the issues faced by seniors living in low income situations.

I would like to take this opportunity to discuss this government's actions with respect to seniors' issues, and we welcome any input from the opposition.

The good news is that Canada has one of the lowest poverty rates among seniors in the world. In fact, most Canadian seniors enjoy a high standard of living. Since 1980, the level of low income among Canadian seniors has dropped from just over 21% to about 6%, yet even this remarkable achievement leaves too many Canadian seniors living below the poverty line.

That is why this government continues to make the needs of low income seniors a priority, and that is why I welcome the opportunity to address the motion before the House today.

The motion proposes that the government review the old age security program with a view to achieving four main objectives. I would like to address each of these now.

First, the motion proposes that the government reduce operational costs in the old age security program by ceasing to pay benefits that subsequently have to be repaid.

Second, it proposes that any savings from these measures should then be allocated first to beneficiaries of the guaranteed income supplement, or the GIS, specifically elderly, single, divorced or widowed individuals.

It is exceedingly rare that the old age security program pays out a benefit that must later be repaid. Most of the overpayments result from errors in statements of income or a late notification of changes in marital status or death. Overpayments occur in less than one-third of 1% of all files and amount to about 1% of total benefits paid out annually.

Our government is working to eliminate even these rare instances of overpayment. Service Canada is working with the provinces to collect vital statistics in a more efficient and timely manner to eliminate the overpayments that occur due to late notifications of death or a change in marital status.

As a result of the government's successful modernization of this important program, the first two sections of this motion are unnecessary. In the very near future the savings to be made from overpayments will amount to mere fractions of pennies for each recipient.

The third provision calls on the government to improve GIS benefits for elderly, single, divorced and widowed individuals.

Under this government all seniors, including those groups mentioned in this motion, are receiving hundreds of more dollars in guaranteed income supplement and old age security benefits than under the previous Liberal government.

In fact, since we took office two years ago we have overseen two increases to the GIS.

Effective January 2006, we raised the GIS by 3.5% and we did again in January 2007. These measures are providing all single recipients with an additional \$430 per year and \$700 more per year per couple.

These increases will raise the total guaranteed income supplement benefit by more than \$2.7 billion over the next five years and benefit more than 1.6 million GIS recipients, including more than 50,000 seniors who were not eligible under previous Liberal governments.

The fourth provision in the motion proposes to exempt 15 hours per week of earned income at minimum wage in the recipient's province of residence without penalty.

Given the range of minimum wage rates across the country, the income exemption would vary from just under \$6,000 in Nova Scotia to just over \$6,000 in Nunavut. Such a measure would raise serious equity concerns as seniors would receive different benefits depending on their province of residence.

• (1825)

The GIS is an important resource for low income seniors. It was never intended to supplement an individual's income. Rather, it was and is intended to ensure every pensioner has enough income from all sources, including the GIS, to maintain and improve the standard of living of Canada's seniors.

That said, we currently have an earned income exemption for GIS recipients of 20% of earned income above and beyond any benefits received from the government. This exemption is capped at \$500, which is reached with an income of \$2,500 per year.

Providing additional assistance to older workers and to seniors wishing to re-enter the workforce is a worthy goal, especially given the labour shortages that exist in so many sectors where seniors are likely to take a part time job. Let us examine the proposed solution for a few moments.

Recent statistics show that only about 4% of guaranteed income supplement recipients have earned income above and beyond the benefits provided to them. Many of those who have decided to enter the workforce have done so for personal reasons that are not financial, for example, to maintain social connections, to continue contributing to the community, to stay active, or just to be out of the house.

Then there are the real considerations. If all of these seniors were to take advantage of the 15-hour exemption, this would cost the GIS program almost a quarter billion dollars each year. This figure assumes no additional seniors would choose to enter the labour market. This translates into a large cost to taxpayers to benefit a very tiny percentage of seniors, and the seniors who could benefit are not likely to be the seniors most in need of additional assistance.

The government is committed to the financial well-being of Canadian seniors, especially those with low incomes. This is why we have done more for seniors in 24 months than the previous Liberal government did in 13 years.

We made it easier for seniors to apply for Canada pension and old age security benefits through the passage of Bill C-36.

We have reduced combined income taxes by allowing senior couples to split their pension income.

We have reduced the GST twice, which is often the only tax that low income seniors pay.

Private Members' Business

We have created the National Seniors Council to advise the government on matters related to seniors' well-being and quality of life.

We have committed \$10 million to combat elder abuse through public awareness and education and upgrading of community buildings and equipment used by seniors.

We have also budgeted an additional \$10 million per year to the new horizons for seniors program to encourage seniors to contribute to their communities.

As I said before, this government is serious about improving support for all seniors. That is why we have examined the provisions of this motion with particular attention.

Again, we thank the member for her concern for seniors. However, it is clear that despite its good intentions, the motion does not do what low income seniors might expect. It does not provide substantial and effective assistance of any kind to seniors, which this government has offered in the past and will continue to offer in the future.

For these reasons, I oppose the motion and urge all members of the House to join me in doing so.

• (1830)

Mr. Glen Pearson (London North Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of the member for Rimouski and the motion she has put forward. I do it for a number of different reasons, some of which are personal.

What we just heard in the House in the last intervention really does not deal with the aspect of seniors' poverty which we are facing now. This is a huge issue and a significant one.

The old age security and guaranteed income supplement were designed at a time when our country was in a very different place. It was a world in which mothers worked at home, raised children and were widowed young, but not divorced, where fathers worked in industrial settings, and where both men and women had much shorter life expectancies at older ages than those of succeeding generations.

Today we know that life is very different and as a result, the social impacts of a changed society have had dramatic repercussions on all segments of this society. For Canada's low income seniors these changes have meant a lingering cycle of poverty. We as parliamentarians actually have the ability to change that.

While there has been a clear improvement in the economic situation of Canadian seniors since the 1980s, a substantial number of seniors continue to live under very difficult economic conditions. While many consider Canada's combined public-private retirement income system a success story, poverty among seniors is not a rare occurrence. It is most common among seniors living alone, women over the age of 80, visible minorities and immigrants.

Private Members' Business

For a good number of these seniors living in poverty, the prospect of a golden retirement simply does not exist. The gains in old age security and CPP cut seniors' poverty in half during the 1980s and the 1990s, a very significant accomplishment, but it showed what government could do when it applied itself to seniors and the struggles that they were facing.

I speak from experience. I am a director of the food bank in London. I have been a volunteer director there for 21 years. We had not seen so many seniors coming to food banks over the course of the last two decades, but that number is now beginning to change. We are seeing more and more of them starting to come and more and more of them in desperate situations.

These are terrible situations for seniors to have to resort to. For a senior who has provided for his or her whole life, who had fought in a war, who had worked, to have to come to a food bank and depend on community largesse and charity is something that is just not right. For many of these people, they are stuck. They are trapped in a system from which there is no escape.

It is worse. There is a huge demographic shift coming. We all know it. We all know that the number of seniors is going to multiply in the next number of years. Food bank statistics, not only from my food bank, but from all the Ontario association of food banks across the province reveal that more and more workers have less and less savings and less and less investment in pension plans.

Those who are poor have absolutely no real hope of building up a cushion of RRSPs. A large number of today's workers will reach retirement age in the next decade and they will have to find creative ways to fund their senior years. This motion, should it pass, and it should, will help all those coming on to OAS, a great many of whom do not have a sufficient form of public protection.

Let us look at some of the statistics of what the population in Canada will be in the next few years. Between 1981 and 2005 the number of seniors in Canada increased from 2.4 million to 4.2 million. Their share of the total population jumped from 9.6% to 13.1%. The aging of the population will accelerate over the next two decades particularly as baby boomers begin turning 65. That will be me soon.

Between 2006 and 2026 the number of seniors is projected to increase from 4.3 million to 8 million. Their share of the population is expected to increase from 13% to 21.2%, this from Statistics Canada in its Portrait of Seniors in Canada.

It has been suggested that the chief problem with Canada's pension system for women is that pension schemes in both the public and private sectors were indeed developed with men in mind. This is true and these last few years are showing this to indeed be the case and we are experiencing this once again on the front lines of food banks.

Elderly single women have consistently been disproportionately represented among the poor in Canada and are twice as likely as elderly men to live in poverty. In 1997 almost 50% of single women over the age of 65 lived below the poverty line, a figure that has remained consistently high over these last number of years.

● (1835)

Various reports have concluded that if the rate of poverty continues for the next two decades with all of these new seniors that are coming in line, the number of poor seniors is expected to double as the population of seniors increases twofold. The government has not yet answered as to how it is going to deal with the influx of people coming in.

Because of the inadequacies of our present system, we are finding seniors in desperate situations. I would like to speak about women and the particular difficulties that they face.

There are many reasons that the current system is not working for Canada's seniors who would otherwise rely on it. Among them, women often find themselves the hardest hit. Some of the reasons for this are pretty obvious.

Women's participation in the paid labour force remains well below that of men. For aboriginal and racialized women, this number is even lower.

The kind of work that women do is also a major factor. Only those who work for relatively large employers can have this kind of benefit. More women than men work in non-unionized jobs and women generally work in sectors where pension coverage is the lowest, such as the retail trade and community, business and personal services.

Above all, one of the greatest obstacles for women saving for retirement is that they simply earn less than men. They still make 72¢ for every dollar that a man makes. Women, therefore, have smaller pensions in retirement.

We know that the social programs that we as parliamentarians help to create directly affect things like health, housing and income, in short, the general well-being of many vulnerable groups. Low income seniors are no exception. With limited access to professional financial training, services that are generally available to all higher income Canadians, it is the role of government, all of us, to ensure that programs are properly designed to benefit low income seniors.

OAS and GIS have made great advances, but millions of seniors who live alone have not been able to increase their economic security; in fact, many are sliding backward. Inequalities in incomes and assets have not declined. Divorce rates continue to climb among middle age Canadians, and more of us, especially women, are choosing to raise children alone.

These trends and projections presented today suggest that low income Canadian seniors will be no better off in the future than they are today in spite of what we have just heard. If we are to increase benefit adequacy and economic security for these vulnerable elders, it makes sense to incorporate an effective income floor into the system. Canadian seniors deserve such a commitment. The reforms put forward by the hon. member present an opportunity to attack this particular problem within our own system.

I thank my colleague from Rimouski for bringing up something that I think is very important. From personal experience and the experience that many members have had, I ask that we look at her leadership and take on this initiative in the spirit in which it was given.

None of us wants to see seniors suffer. All of us want seniors who are living in poverty to be able to climb out of it. We all say the words and I believe we probably all mean them, but we set up a system that is a trap and seniors are not able to work their way out of it.

Especially for senior women, I ask that all members of the House support this particular motion, not because of from whom it comes or even so much the language that is used, but the time has come when we should accept what senior women are going through and all of us should act on it. I thank the member for taking the initiative.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Gravel (Repentigny, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I too want to support the motion of the hon. member for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques. Seniors are as important to me as they are to her. This motion is in line with Bill C-490 introduced by the Bloc Québécois in December.

My Liberal colleague had some very interesting points to make. However, I find the comments of my colleague opposite, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, to be amazingly nonsensical. By “nonsensical” I mean foolish, silly, and just plain stupid.

When I heard the hon. member say that the Conservative government has been quite generous to seniors, I wondered what planet she has been on. I know that in two years the government has given an additional \$18 to the guaranteed income supplement, when it knows that people are living below the poverty line. I do not see any generosity in that. When she argues that in 13 years, the Liberal government did nothing and that the Conservatives have done more in two years, I do not think it is right to justify doing more by comparing oneself to those who did nothing.

I am very pleased to speak to this motion. As I was saying earlier, it looks a lot like our bill C-490 tabled last December by the member for Alfred-Pellan. This bill follows up my tour of Quebec, in 2007, to identify the needs of the seniors of today and of the future.

Having realized that seniors have become impoverished over the past ten years, I met with several seniors' groups and associations in all parts of Quebec who shared with me their fears, needs and hopes. They spoke of the quality of life of seniors, of the causes of their poverty and of the solutions recommended to various levels of government. I also heard the opinions of seniors on Quebec society. The results are reflected in the bill that we tabled and that has four components. It is very much in keeping with the motion by my colleague for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques.

The first component is automatic registration for the guaranteed income supplement. Why? Simply because this supplement provides additional income to low-income seniors. When we say low-income we are talking about individuals living in poverty. We know that poverty takes many forms and that thousands of seniors are entitled to the guaranteed income supplement. However, they do not receive

Private Members' Business

it because they do not know about it, which is also due to their poverty.

On August 23, 2001, the *Toronto Star* estimated that 380,000 seniors in Canada were eligible for the guaranteed income supplement but were not receiving it. In Quebec, more than 80,000 people were in this situation. The reason is simple. Poor seniors often have difficulty reading and understanding forms, and the forms at the time were extremely complicated. People were also unaware that they had to apply every year. This is no longer the case thanks to Bill C-36, which was adopted last May.

There are other reasons associated with poverty as well. Poverty affects people who have never worked outside the home, who do not file income tax returns, who are aboriginal or who live in remote areas. We also think of people with poor literacy skills, people who speak neither French nor English, people who are disabled or ill and people who are homeless. There are many reasons.

If these seniors were automatically registered for the guaranteed income supplement at age 65, this problem would be eliminated. The work the Bloc Québécois has done over the past several years has drastically reduced the number of people who do not receive the guaranteed income supplement. In Quebec there are apparently still about 40,000 people who do not receive the supplement, but in 2001 there were 80,000.

The second part of our bill involves a \$110 a month increase in the guaranteed income supplement. This would bring the poorest seniors up to the poverty line, as my colleague's motion says. The calculation was done in 2004, when the poverty level for a single person was set at \$14,794 a year. Poor seniors who receive the maximum guaranteed income supplement are getting only \$13,514 in 2007-08.

● (1840)

This means that that their income is \$1,280 below the poverty line, or \$106 per month, which we have rounded up to \$110. This is not asking for much, just getting them over the poverty line. That is not too much to ask in a country like ours.

The third part of our bill concerns full retroactivity of the guaranteed income supplement for people who have been given a raw deal under the current system. In May 2007, Bill C-36 resulted in just 11 months of retroactivity for poor seniors. That is not enough; we must do more. During the election campaign, the Conservative Party agreed to fix this problem. Now that they are in power, they do not want to talk about it. Nobody is asking for handouts here; we just want seniors to get their fair share from a system that ripped them off.

When one owes money to a person, one has a legal debt to that person. This is about justice, honesty and dignity. Just think of Mrs. Bolduc in Toronto who told a Radio-Canada reporter what it is like to live in poverty. Many seniors are in the same position as Mrs. Bolduc.

Private Members' Business

The fourth element our bill introduces is a six-month compassion period for seniors who lose their spouses. We know what kind of situation these people face. A six-month period would enable surviving spouses to recover from the grieving process and figure things out, because their benefits will automatically be reduced. This period will certainly offer a degree of security to grieving seniors.

The government's failure to help our poorest seniors is unacceptable. We have known for quite some time now that seniors are some of the poorest people in our society. Poverty affects their health, makes them feel insecure about their future and makes them even more vulnerable to those who claim to be taking care of them. Many newspapers have reported on violence against seniors and exploitation of the elderly. These people are in a very vulnerable position. It is disgusting that, despite vast budget surpluses, one government after another has failed to solve the problem raised by members of the Bloc Québécois.

The Bloc Québécois supports the motion by the member for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques. That is a long name for a riding; it would be easier to call her by her name. I am asking all parliamentarians to support this motion as well as our bill, which will be debated soon in the House. It is a question of justice, fairness and dignity for all those who came before us and paved the way for us.

I would like to close with the 2006 definition of poverty by the National Council of Welfare:

—poverty is not just a lack of income; it can also be a synonym for social exclusion. When people cannot meet their basic needs, they cannot afford even simple activities. Single parents or persons with a family member who is sick or disabled often suffer from “poverty of time” as well, and have too few hours during the day to earn income, take care of others, obtain an education, have some social interaction or even get the sleep they need. This form of social exclusion and isolation can lead to other problems, such as poor health, depression and dysfunction. Poverty can quickly deprive individuals of their dignity, confidence and hope.

This often happens to our seniors who are sick and poor.

● (1845)

[English]

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to participate in the debate tonight on the motion brought forward by the member for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques on the old age security system. This motion is very timely.

This afternoon I tabled yet another petition in the House signed by hundreds more seniors, asking the government to pay them the money they were owed as a result of the StatsCan error in calculating the cost of living increase. Seniors were shortchanged on their public income supports because of this error. In calling on the government to reimburse them, they are simply asking for fairness. Yet the government is refusing to act.

If the government will not give seniors the benefits to which they are already entitled, I am not optimistic that it will contemplate enhancements to those benefits. However, I nonetheless believe that this is a critically important debate.

Unlike the parliamentary secretary, the Prime Minister cannot script me. Nor can he prevent me from speaking up on behalf of

seniors. In fact, that is why I was elected to the House, to represent the views of the residents of Hamilton Mountain and to ensure that their concerns were being championed in the single most important democratic institution in this nation.

All politicians pay lip service to the fact that seniors built our country. They talk about needing to ensure that seniors can retire with dignity and respect and that they deserve that dignity and respect.

Let me tell the House what is happening to seniors, not just in my community, but across the whole country. With each passing year, it becomes more and more apparent that seniors are falling farther and farther behind. They have worked hard all their lives, they have played by the rules, but now everywhere they turn, every bill they open, they are paying more and getting less.

It is a fact that increases in the cost of living hits seniors disproportionately harder than any other segment of the population. When StatsCan determines the annual cost of living, upon which adjustments are based, its basket of goods includes things like plasma TVs, iPods, computers, all goods which are coming down in price and reducing the cost of living figures. Those also are not goods that poor seniors are buying. The items they are spending money on are essentials like heat, hydro, food and shelter, all of which have been going up and up.

In a series of polls that were conducted by the Canadian Labour Congress in 2004, 73% of Canadians polled said that they were worried about not having enough money to live after retirement, up by almost 20% from just two years before.

Canadians are worried about the solvency of their private pensions and the adequacy of both CPP and public income supports. Those fears are well-founded. Since the middle 1990s, the income of seniors has reached a ceiling and the gap between the revenues of seniors and those of other Canadians is now increasing.

According to the government's National Advisory Council on Aging, between 1997 and 2003 the mean income of seniors' households increased by \$4,100, while the average income of other Canadian households increased by \$9,000. The situation is even more pronounced for seniors living alone.

Private retirement savings are concentrated in a very small percentage of families. According to StatsCan, 25% of families hold 84% of these assets, while three out of ten families have no private pensions at all.

We find ourselves in a situation now where, across Canada, we have over a quarter of a million seniors living in poverty. That is hardly retirement with dignity and respect.

What is the government doing to address this issue? In fact, I would argue, precious little. We have now had two throne speeches, two budgets and one economic update from the government and none of them left seniors with anything about which to cheer.

We did not get universal drug coverage, no improvements to health care or long term care, no national housing strategy and no review of public income supports. The only people cheering were the Liberals who supported the Harper government's first throne speech and let the most recent mini-budget pass—

● (1850)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I want to remind the hon. member not to use proper names, but ridings or titles when referring to our colleagues.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I apologize for using the Prime Minister's name.

Nonetheless, the Liberals did give the Conservatives what the voters would not do, which is in essence a de facto majority government.

In a country that had a surplus of over \$14 billion, that simply is not good enough. The income security of seniors must be at the top of the government's agenda, but it is not.

In fact, while we are debating an enhancement to income supports for seniors, the government is not even doing a particularly good job of getting seniors the benefits to which they are already entitled.

According to the government's own statistics, an estimated 130,000 Canadian seniors who are eligible for the guaranteed income supplement are not receiving it. Why? Because even if they are aware of the program, the application process is unduly complex, and many seniors lack the language or literacy skills to avail themselves of this benefit.

What has the government done about this? Instead of pursuing aggressive outreach programs to inform seniors of their entitlements, the Conservative government has re-designated positions at Service Canada so that experts, whose only role it once was to assist seniors to find their way through the maze of the CPP, the OAS and the GIS, have now been replaced by generalists who deal with everything from employment insurance to boat licences.

To add insult to injury, if they do not apply for their entitlements in a timely fashion, they can go back only so far in claiming retroactivity. A system designed like that is clearly not a system designed to help seniors retire with dignity and respect.

That is why I welcome the motion that the member from Rimouski has brought before this House today. In fact, it picks up on an item that was already part of the NDP's seniors charter, which I had the privilege of introducing in the House last year.

The seniors charter called on the government to guarantee for every senior in Canada the right to income security through protected pensions and indexed income support that provides a reasonable state of economic welfare. That charter, I am happy to say, was passed by members of this House by a vote of 231 to 52, including by the Conservative MPs in this chamber, I might add.

Only the BQ voted against it. Despite the fact that seniors from coast to coast to coast built this country, including seniors from Quebec, of course, the BQ abandoned the elderly in the province of Quebec simply for its own narrowly defined partisan purposes. Perhaps that is why the member from Rimouski has abandoned her

Private Members' Business

former colleagues and now sits as an independent. She is finally free to advocate on behalf of seniors in her community.

In any event, as I said, her motion speaks to one of the sections that was part of the NDP seniors charter and so I am happy to support it here in principle. I say this on the understanding that the motion will be amended at the next debate and therefore will focus on the core section of the motion that I expect to survive after the amendment.

In essence, what the motion proposes to do is enhance the guaranteed income supplement for the very neediest of seniors and increase the income threshold for eligibility.

As members of this House will know, the guaranteed income supplement is one of the three major income support programs available to seniors through the federal government. It was developed to reduce poverty among seniors by providing a monthly income supplement for eligible seniors with low incomes.

However, as I said earlier, despite this program, there are still a quarter of a million seniors living in poverty. I am proud to support any motion that will assist this group of the most vulnerable in our community.

From my perspective, I think we in this House could and should have gone further. As it stands now, Motion No. 383 will enhance GIS benefits for only the very neediest in our community, yet from my perspective everyone who receives the GIS desperately needs more money.

While any increase is certainly welcome, what we really need is a comprehensive review of the entire income support system for seniors. Indeed, I have a motion on the order paper, Motion No. 128, which does precisely that. It calls for a review that looks ahead 10 years and ensures annually that seniors have an income that allows them to live with the dignity and respect they deserve. I am proud to say that this is the very first motion that I tabled in this House upon being elected.

It is precisely because I am keenly aware of the growing income needs of seniors that I am happy this motion is before us today. Certainly, as I said earlier in my comments, the many elderly women in my community of Hamilton Mountain who are living alone are experiencing poverty at much higher rates than any other segment of the senior population. Indeed, it is for every senior who is living on his or her own that I will stand in support of this motion.

I know that my time to speak tonight is short, so I would like to focus just briefly on the last part of the motion, which would make more seniors eligible for the GIS. Surely we can all agree that this is a laudable goal.

● (1855)

What section (d) of the motion does is raise the income threshold for GIS eligibility. It is a sad reality in Canada that many seniors cannot survive on their public income supports alone, so many are supplementing their income by participating in the workforce far beyond the normal retirement age.

Adjournment Proceedings

I heard from a woman in Vancouver just two weeks ago who told me that her husband is in his eighties and still working because it is the only way that they can afford her prescription drugs. While that is a national disgrace and should be addressed through a national pharmacare program and adequate income support for seniors, it is a reality that is being lived daily by thousands of seniors across the country.

Income security is crucial to a retirement with dignity and respect. I say to all of the seniors watching our proceedings tonight that they should not let anyone tell them that it cannot be done.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The time provided for private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*English*]

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Hon. Gurbax Malhi (Bramalea—Gore—Malton, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to ask the government for a third time to explain its lack of compassion and its discriminatory approach to visitor visas. Not surprisingly, my previous attempts to get an answer from the government were met with empty words. Instead of addressing the reality of our broken visa system, the minister claimed that the real issue is “the safety and security of those who are already here”.

The minister's deflection from the problem at hand is typical of the government.

Is the security of our country put at risk when a bride to be invites her parents to come to Canada for a visit to share the joy of her wedding day? Is the safety of Canadians threatened by a Nigerian grandmother who wants to come to our country to see her newborn grandchild?

Of course, invoking national security is a convenient tactic for the government, considering that no usable data are kept on the reasons for denying visitor visa applications. Even if security were the main reason for refusing visitor visas, we would have no way of knowing it.

The reality faced by my constituents and by Canadians across the country is that the decisions made by visa officers are often difficult to understand. Some visas are denied to people who have visited Canada many times under the previous government. Similarly, more than once I have seen cases in which an applicant was denied entry to Canada even after being granted multiple entry visas to both the United Kingdom and the United States.

One of the most tragic examples of the failure of the current visa system was laid bare in the August 21, 2007 issue of the *Toronto Star*. Nicholas Keung writes of how the body of Hu Xiu-hua, an immigrant to Canada who passed away last summer, lay unclaimed in a Toronto morgue for almost two months. As citizens of China, Ms. Hu's elderly parents were required to apply for a visitor visa to

claim their child's remains. Their application was denied not once, not twice, but six times.

The ugly truth is that the vast majority of these cases involve applicants from developing nations. How can the government claim that the visitor visa system is fair and impartial when it so clearly discriminates against Canadians with families from developing nations?

I am not alone in my frustration with the visitor visa system. I am sure that my colleagues of all political stripes deal with many similar cases in their constituencies. The government must stop denying that the visitor visa system is broken and start working to find solutions that benefit Canadians and their families abroad.

• (1900)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate this opportunity to comment on temporary resident visas.

There is no question that there is a lot of rhetoric coming from the member opposite. It is clear that the intention of the hon. member in large measure is political and is not based on the facts.

The reality is that the overall approval rate for temporary resident visas has remained consistent, ranging between 79% to 82% over the past five years.

The government has an application process for temporary resident visas in order to protect the integrity of the immigration process and to maintain the safety and security of Canadians. The member opposite knows that.

Visa officers assess individual temporary resident visa applications and take into account the circumstances of the applicant, including the reason for travel. Applications are considered on a case by case basis on the specific facts presented by the applicant.

The government aims at being compassionate in issuing visas. However, given the high levels of fraud and misrepresentation in some regions of the world, it is incumbent upon visa officers abroad to examine all visa applications very carefully.

As my hon. colleague knows, temporary resident visas are issued to bona fide visitors, students or workers who will comply with admission requirements. This includes leaving Canada at the end of the authorized period of temporary stay. All of these factors must be taken into account by our visa officers overseas.

The government has improved service for travellers coming to Canada for business or personal reasons, using our visa application centres in India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Indonesia, and is considering extending such services to several other countries.

In India, for example, this means that citizens wishing to apply as visitors, students or workers can submit their temporary resident applications at nine visa application centres across the country and at a centre geographically convenient to them.

Adjournment Proceedings

FOREST INDUSTRY

In 2006 the visa offices in New Delhi and Chandigarh together processed almost 78,000 visa applications with an approval rate of 67.4%, or slightly more than two out of three. Those are the overall systemic numbers. We accept more immigrants from India than any other country but China, and 10,000 more last year than a decade ago, from 19,000 in 1997 to more than 30,000 last year.

The overall approval rate for temporary resident visas has remained historically consistent. In 2006 it was 81% and has remained at just over 80% for most years since 1983.

The government is also making efforts to permit visa-free travel to citizens from a greater number of countries. In 2006 the visa requirement for Estonia was lifted. In October of this year, we lifted the visa requirements for the Czech Republic and the Republic of Latvia.

Citizens of these countries can now visit Canada without a visa. Citizens in half of the 12 countries who have joined the European Union since 2004 enjoy visa-free travel to this country. We continue to review the remaining EU countries where a visa is still required.

These measures by our Conservative government are helping families maintain their close ties.

Visas are effective tools to protect the integrity of our borders and to ensure the health and safety of Canadians. The Government of Canada has no greater duty than to protect and maintain the safety and security of its people.

●(1905)

Hon. Gurbax Malhi: Mr. Speaker, I do not agree with the facts or the figures the parliamentary secretary has provided. I have been to New Delhi and Chandigarh many times and do not agree with them.

One positive step on this issue would be the creation of a system of visitor visa bonds. Under a visitor visa bond system, immigration counsellors would be given discretion over the creation of visa bonds. They could establish minimum and maximum visa bond amounts as a guideline for immigration officials and could allow the visa bond to apply either to the sponsor or to the visitor.

Solutions need to be found on this issue. I believe the use of visa bonds on a case by case basis would be a good start.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Mr. Speaker, the figures are what they are. They indicate that there has been no significant change downward in the rate of refusals for temporary resident visas.

The hon. member opposite is yet again attempting to perpetuate as fact what is not fact. He has tried a number of times to politicize an important issue of security and procedural integrity. The government is not refusing temporary resident visas at a rate higher than that of the previous Liberal government. There is no doubt about that.

The last known significant drop in temporary resident visa approvals actually occurred under the previous Liberal government. If that member were truly concerned about this issue, then he would have raised it in the House before now.

The facts speak for themselves. There is no basis to the allegation. It is really a matter of political posturing and nothing more.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as you will recall, Professor Irwin Corey once stated, "If we don't change direction soon, we'll end up where we're going".

So it is with the most recent announcement of \$1 billion for the provinces to help hard hit communities. It is trying to go everywhere but goes nowhere.

On the surface it sounds like a grand plan. Regrettably, it is little more than a scam. Believe it or not it reflects the worst of the Conservatives' hidden agenda.

In spite of being the beneficiary of the Liberal government's record of annual budget surpluses, the fact remains that it was a Conservative government that drove this nation into those huge deficits.

Despite inheriting sound finances, the Prime Minister has chosen to tie this relief money to the next budget. The shameful reality of this tactic is that the communities in crisis will not receive any of these funds until June or July.

Once again, I call upon the Prime Minister to release this \$1 billion immediately. I do this knowing full well that the proposed community development trust has serious flaws.

For instance, the money will be distributed on a per capita basis to each province and territory. Even Alberta whose economy is bursting at the seams will receive millions of dollars; whereas Ontario, with its thousands of job losses, will receive only \$211 million.

That is why industry, labour, communities and families are condemning this as "a billion too little and two years too late".

The fact that there are no conditions on the use of the funding further means that each province can spend the money as it sees fit. It will not save one job or one plant.

It is truly shameful that the government is playing politics with the lives of Canadians. It displaces all of the progress made by the forest industry with regard to the positive suggestions for assisting the forest products industries.

Many organizations, such as the Forest Products Association of Canada, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, the Canadian Institute of Forestry, the steelworkers union, the Ontario Forest Industries Association and the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association, all have made positive suggestions. None of this would even be necessary had the Liberal government's forest competitive strategy been implemented at the \$1.5 billion level.

This tactic of announce it in January, but wait until July scam is absolutely shameful.

Adjournment Proceedings

●(1910)

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on December 7, 2007 the hon. member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River implied that the forestry plan his party presented in the run-up to the last election would have saved the industry.

We all know what voters thought of that party's bag of election goodies. They rejected them. Canadians placed their confidence in this government. We take this responsibility seriously and are providing Canadians with the leadership that they deserve.

I do not wish to make light of the serious challenges facing the forestry industry today. We are witnessing a decline in the U.S. housing starts, a decline in the North American newsprint market, and increased low-cost competition from offshore.

These pressures have intensified over the past year, especially with the rapid depreciation of the U.S. dollar.

Further, higher housing inventories and difficulties in the U.S. sub-prime lending market have meant significant declines in U.S. residential construction; the key driver of lumber and panel consumption in North America.

These challenges have hit the industry hard. Good paying jobs have been lost and communities are being impacted.

However, the government has not been sitting on the sidelines. On January 10 our government unveiled a \$1 billion community development trust, designed to help vulnerable communities dependent on a single employer or sector.

Provinces and territories will be able to use this funding for a variety of uses, ranging from investing in job training and skills development to developing community transition plans aimed at diversifying local economies.

That is not all. Through our budgets, economic statements and "Advantage Canada", we have created, and we continue to create, a supportive business environment for all industries, including the forestry products sector; one that promotes competitiveness, innovation and success.

In short, the government is working diligently to create an environment in which all industries can succeed. And the same is true for the forest products industry.

The forest industry plan to which the hon. member refers included a loan insurance program and an industry support program. These programs were to provide short term relief to firms pending the resolution of the softwood lumber dispute. The party opposite had to offer these programs because it could not resolve the longstanding dispute. However, this government did. Less than nine months after taking office, the government made good on its pledge to resolve the softwood lumber dispute.

The softwood lumber agreement offers many benefits to Canadian producers, not the least of which is the return of over \$5 billion. This contributes to the industry's stability, thereby benefiting workers and supporting the economic development of rural communities.

Further, the government has invested \$400 million in the forestry sector. We have contributed \$127.5 million to encourage the long term competitiveness of the forestry industry, which will in turn help advance a prosperous forestry industry, and the communities and workers that depend upon it.

We are devoting \$72.5 million to the targeted initiative for older workers, a cost-shared program with the provinces and territories. It focuses on the needs of older workers who have lost their jobs in communities where the local economy is facing ongoing unemployment or where industries, such as forestry, are affected by downsizing and closures.

We are investing \$200 million to combat the spread and consequences of the mountain pine beetle infestation in western Canada.

In closing, the government has supported, and will continue to support, the Canadian forestry industry. The Speech from the Throne highlighted the government's ongoing commitment to stand up for Canada's traditional industries, including the forestry industry, and that is what we are doing.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member opposite for recognizing all my efforts in bringing forestry back to the federal agenda.

Point by point I have outlined the shortcomings of the latest Conservative scam. We in northwestern Ontario will not be fooled.

Canadians in crisis want the government to release the available surplus now. Maybe some jobs and some plants can be saved. One thing is certain. If we wait until July, more plants will close and more workers will lose their jobs.

On behalf of those workers and families who are suffering from tough economic times, I ask for compassion. Deliver the money now. Do not hold these workers hostage any longer.

●(1915)

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Speaker, time and again the hon. member refers to out-of-date policy authored by a government that voters rejected.

After less than two years in office, our government has settled the longstanding softwood lumber dispute and returned billions of dollars to the Canadian industry. The resulting injection of funds is worth more than worn platitudes espoused by a worn party.

However, we have not rested on our laurels. We have provided \$400 million in assistance to the forestry industry. We have lowered taxes and created the conditions where both forest and non-forest companies can succeed. We have established a \$1 billion fund for vulnerable communities and employees.

This government has provided the support that Canadians expect. This government has the courage and integrity to set priorities, to act on them, and to honour its commitments to Canadians.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, healthy cities and communities are essential to a prosperous country with the quality of life Canadians need and deserve. In order to deliver the services and build the kinds of communities we need, Canadian cities and communities require funding that is fair and sustained.

Cities across Canada are continuing to struggle with multitudes of pressures, including the city of Toronto, which is home to my riding of Davenport. Toronto is, in many respects, at the economic centre of Canada. It is imperative that this great city is healthy and prosperous.

Having served the people of Davenport for three terms as a city councillor, I understand that municipal governments provide services that are often the most direct in terms of their impact on the quality of life of Canadians. They maintain transportation services, including public transit and roads, they fund and support cultural programming and social services, they provide local policing and recreational services. To do all these things and more, cities need equitable and sustained funding. This is a simple fact of life.

For many years, municipalities were both neglected and not afforded the respect they deserved. This changed dramatically during the terms of the last two Liberal governments. First, former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien created an urban task force, under the leadership of the member for York West, that made groundbreaking recommendations. Then the member for LaSalle—Émard brought our cities to the table, extended to them respect and under this new relationship began to assist them financially with infrastructure, including public transit initiatives.

These included transferring 1¢ of the gas tax to municipalities. We appointed Canada's first secretary of state for cities and communities, my colleague, the member for Don Valley West. We established a working relationship with cities. In fact, we were days away from signing a tripartite agreement to set up a permanent agreement between the Government of Canada, Ontario and Toronto when the members for the New Democratic Party decided to join with their colleagues in the Conservative Party to defeat the government for what were clearly political opportune reasons.

Indeed, the mayor of Toronto, a former member of the NDP, just last month made note of his displeasure with the actions of the NDP in a statement applauding the work of the member for Don Valley West. Clearly, the mayor was upset that because of the NDP's decision, municipalities across Canada must now deal with a government that refuses to even abide by existing financial agreements or extend to cities the respect they found from the previous Liberal government.

I note that the current finance minister served in the Mike Harris government in Ontario that, through downloading of costs, virtually paralyzed that province's municipalities with unimaginable fiscal burdens.

I stand together with municipal leaders across Canada in demanding the kind of respect they received from the Liberal government and to call on the federal government to commit to sustainable and predictable funding.

Adjournment Proceedings

Healthy and prosperous cities are required for a healthy and prosperous country. When will the government become a real partner for Toronto and all Canadian cities?

Mr. Brian Jean (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Davenport for the opportunity to address this important issue. I would like to read a quote:

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member knows that the government does not operate and no government can operate on the basis of dedicated taxes.

Who said that? The former finance minister and former prime minister, the member for LaSalle—Émard, who the member has indicated was the founder of all these great and wonderful things for cities. Indeed he was not. It is this government.

On November 6, 2007, our Prime Minister launched building Canada, the government's new infrastructure plan. Building Canada is worth \$33 billion, an unprecedented amount. This had never been done before in Canada since the second world war. This is over a seven year period. It is the largest and most long term commitment to public infrastructure by any federal government in modern history.

Over \$17.6 billion, or 50% of the building Canada plan is in the form of direct guaranteed funding for municipalities to help them with their infrastructure needs. That is the important part. We are listening to them and we are putting money into their priorities.

This includes \$8 billion in new money to extend the gas tax fund from 2010 to 2014. The gas tax fund is predictable, up front and flexible for cities. It responds absolutely directly to municipal requests for stable funding.

In addition, we have extended the 100% GST rebate to municipalities, thereby providing an additional estimated \$5.8 billion in flexible funding that we are confident they will use for their priorities.

We have committed another \$8.8 billion in new funding for the building Canada fund to support large and small scale projects across the country. This will include support for key priority projects identified by municipalities, again their priorities, such as transit and clean water.

As part of this fund there is a dedicated component that will support projects in communities with a population of less than 100,000.

This Conservative government has taken strong action announcing support for priorities that will bring benefits to municipalities right across this great country, including clean water, waste water, better public transit and green energy.

Adjournment Proceedings

We will also address local priorities such as improved transportation; connectivity and broadband, which is very important in rural Canada; solid waste management; disaster mitigation, such as happened in Manitoba; brownfield redevelopment, such as happened in Atlantic Canada, British Columbia and other areas; cultural infrastructure, such as in Toronto and Quebec; sport infrastructure; and tourism.

These are the priorities that municipalities have identified and we are responding in an unprecedented way.

This includes strong support for small communities, and large cities like Toronto. Over \$900 million was announced by the Prime Minister to support improved public transit and highway infrastructure in the greater Toronto area. In fact, he announced that last March for five different projects in that area. There have been other announcements, including to help clean water in the Huron Elgin London project. We are taking positive action.

Provinces, territories and municipalities asked for increased, predictable and longer term funding to address growing infrastructure pressures. We have heard them. We have listened and we have taken positive action for Canadians.

● (1920)

Mr. Mario Silva: Mr. Speaker, predictable and sustainable funding by the federal government allows cities like Toronto to meet the ever increasing demands that are placed upon them for better public transit, better policing services and sustainable infrastructure.

Make no mistake. This is a quality of life issue for all Canadians and it is an economic issue for our country. Without healthy, vibrant and prosperous cities, quality of life will suffer for all of our citizens. There is no doubt whatsoever that our economy will also come under pressure.

Cities need the support of the federal government to build better communities where public transit is improved and appealing, where roads and infrastructure are maintained and safe, and where recreational programs can be maintained for the young, the old and for those who are most disadvantaged.

When will the government understand that, as I have said, healthy cities and communities mean a healthy country? We cannot have one without the other.

Mr. Brian Jean: Mr. Speaker, I have to identify who left us in this mess. After 13 years of inaction by the Liberals, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has indicated that there is an infrastructure deficit of over \$123 billion from coast to coast in this country of ours.

I would like to read one more quote. This is from the then intergovernmental affairs minister, who is now the official opposition leader, when he told mayors from across Canada:

—you know full well that the Constitution clearly establishes that municipal affairs are under provincial jurisdiction, and that the provinces are determined to keep it that way.

The Prime Minister, the minister, this Conservative government are taking real action for municipalities. We are not listening to the former intergovernmental affairs minister. We are not listening to the leader of the official opposition because it would not get done.

● (1925)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): 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 7:25 p.m.)

CONTENTS

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Joseph Neil Tilley	
Mr. Manning	2343
Father Louis Quinn	
Mr. Tonks	2343
Olymel	
Mr. Paquette	2343
Status of Women	
Mrs. Mathysen	2344
Alzheimer Awareness Month	
Mr. Brown (Barrie)	2344
Red River Floodway	
Mr. Simard	2344
Human Rights	
Mr. Poilievre	2344
Manufacturing and Forestry Industries	
Mr. Vincent	2344
National Red Scarf Day	
Mrs. Yelich	2345
Alzheimer's Disease	
Ms. Bennett	2345
Aboriginal Affairs	
Mr. Bruinooge	2345
Alzheimer's Disease	
Ms. McDonough	2345
Human Rights	
Ms. Neville	2345
Minister of Public Works and Government Services	
Ms. Faille	2346
The Ladybug Foundation	
Ms. Dhalla	2346
Justice	
Mr. Tilson	2346

ORAL QUESTIONS

Afghanistan	
Mr. Dion	2346
Mr. Harper	2346
Mr. Dion	2347
Mr. Harper	2347
Mr. Dion	2347
Mr. Harper	2347
Mr. Ignatieff	2347
Mr. MacKay	2347
Mr. Ignatieff	2347
Mr. MacKay	2347

Public Works and Government Services

Mr. Duceppe	2347
Mr. Harper	2347
Mr. Duceppe	2347
Mr. Harper	2348
Mr. Guimond	2348
Mr. Van Loan	2348
Mr. Guimond	2348
Mr. Harper	2348
Afghanistan	
Mr. Layton	2348
Mr. Harper	2348
Mr. Layton	2348
Mr. Harper	2348
Mr. Coderre	2348
Mr. Van Loan	2348
Mr. Coderre	2349
Mr. Van Loan	2349
Ethics	
Mr. Holland	2349
Mr. Van Loan	2349
Mr. Holland	2349
Mr. Van Loan	2349
Manufacturing and Forestry Industries	
Mr. Crête	2349
Mr. Harper	2349
Mr. Crête	2349
Mr. Harper	2350
Chalk River Nuclear Facilities	
Mrs. DeBellefeuille	2350
Mr. Lunn	2350
Mrs. DeBellefeuille	2350
Mr. Lunn	2350
Mr. Alghabra	2350
Mr. Lunn	2350
Mr. Alghabra	2350
Mr. Lunn	2350
Science and Technology	
Mr. Brison	2350
Mr. Prentice	2351
Mr. Brison	2351
Mr. Prentice	2351
Kenya	
Mr. Goodyear	2351
Ms. Oda	2351
Public Works and Government Services	
Mr. Angus	2351
Mr. Van Loan	2351
Mr. Angus	2351
Mr. Van Loan	2351

Manufacturing Industry	
Mrs. Barnes	2352
Mr. Prentice	2352
Mrs. Barnes	2352
Mr. Prentice	2352
Mr. McCallum (Markham—Unionville)	2352
Mr. Flaherty	2352
Mr. McCallum (Markham—Unionville)	2352
Mr. Flaherty	2352

Public Works and Government Services Canada	
Mr. Duceppe	2353
Mr. Harper	2353
Mr. Duceppe	2353
Mr. Harper	2353

Industry	
Mrs. Kadis	2353
Mr. Flaherty	2353

Public Safety	
Mrs. Smith	2353
Mr. Day	2353

Softwood Lumber	
Mr. Julian	2353
Mr. Emerson	2353
Mr. Julian	2354
Mr. Emerson	2354

Industry	
Ms. Beaumier	2354
Mr. Flaherty	2354

Hog Industry	
Mr. Petit	2354
Mr. Paradis	2354

Points of Order	
Oral Questions	
Mr. Harper	2354

Privilege	
Answers to Oral Questions	
Mr. Cannis	2354
Mr. Van Loan	2355

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

Committees of the House	
Health	
Mrs. Smith	2355
Procedure and House Affairs	
Mr. Goodyear	2355
Justice and Human Rights	
Mr. Hanger	2355
Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development	
Mr. Van Loan	2355
Procedure and House Affairs	
Mr. Goodyear	2355
Motion for concurrence	2355
(Motion agreed to)	2356

Petitions	
Canadian Heritage	
Mrs. Barnes	2356
Hourly Rates of Pay	
Mr. Nadeau	2356
Tobacco Products	
Ms. Charlton	2356
Seniors	
Ms. Charlton	2356
Human Trafficking	
Mrs. Smith	2356
Age of Consent	
Mr. McTeague	2356
Visitor Visas	
Mr. McTeague	2356
Criminal Code	
Mrs. Grewal	2356
Sri Lanka	
Mr. Lee	2357
Charter of Rights and Freedoms	
Mrs. Gallant	2357
Public Transit	
Mrs. Kadis	2357
Canada Post	
Mrs. Kadis	2357
Bill C-458	
Mr. Tweed	2357
Canadian Forces	
Mr. Silva	2357
Manufacturing Industry	
Mr. Silva	2357
Guaranteed Income Supplement	
Ms. Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques)	2357
Income Trusts	
Mr. Wilson	2358
Mr. Bagnell	2358
Visitor Visas	
Mr. McGuinty	2358
Questions on the Order Paper	
Mr. Lukiwski	2358

Motions for Papers	
Mr. Lukiwski	2358

Privilege	
Alleged Impediment in the discharge of a Member's Duties	
Mr. Szabo	2358

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Criminal Code	
Bill C-27. Second reading	2359
Mr. Ménard (Hochelaga)	2359
Mr. Bagnell	2361
(Motion agreed to, bill read the second time and referred to a committee)	2362

Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999

Mr. Ritz	2362
Bill C-33. Second reading	2362
Mr. Bagnell	2364
Mr. Bevington	2365
Mr. Lauzon	2365
Mr. Tonks	2366
Mr. Bevington	2366
Mr. Bezan	2367
Mr. McGuinty	2367
Mr. Sorenson	2370
Mr. Bevington	2371
Mr. Fitzpatrick	2371
Mr. Bellavance	2371
Mr. Bagnell	2373
Mr. Bevington	2374
Mr. Bezan	2374

Settlement of International Investment Disputes Act

Motion agreed to	2375
(Bill read the third time and passed)	2375

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**Old Age Security Program**

Ms. Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques)	2375
Motion M-383	2376
Ms. Charlton	2377
Mr. Gravel	2378
Mrs. Yelich	2378
Mr. Pearson	2379
Mr. Gravel	2381
Ms. Charlton	2382

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS**Citizenship and Immigration**

Mr. Malhi	2384
Mr. Komarnicki	2384

Forest Industry

Mr. Boshcoff	2385
Mr. Carrie	2386

Infrastructure

Mr. Silva	2387
Mr. Jean	2387

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