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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, November 17, 2011

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, November 17, 2011

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

● (1005)

[*English*]

PRIVACY COMMISSIONER

The Speaker: I have the honour to lay upon the table the report of the Privacy Commissioner concerning the Privacy Act for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2011.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h), this document is deemed permanently referred to the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE REPORTS

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on behalf of 95 departments and agencies, I have the honour to table, in both official language, the departmental performance reports for the 2010-11 fiscal year and their companion piece, entitled “Canada’s Performance 2010–11”.

[*English*]

I invite members to access the performance report at tbs-sct.gc.ca/dpr-rmr.

I also ask members to think about the benefits of using electronic reports versus the usual thousands of printed pages that have been distributed in previous years. Indeed, for the first time, the great majority of these DPRs are on memory sticks, thus saving the cost of printing three million pages. I have the honour of doing this for the first time in this Parliament.

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[*Translation*]

VETERANS OMBUDSMAN

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to table this morning, in both official

languages, the Veterans Ombudsman’s report, entitled “One Veteran: A Matter of Fairness”.

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[*English*]

POOLED REGISTERED PENSION PLANS ACT

Hon. Peter Van Loan (for the Minister of Finance) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-25, An Act relating to pooled registered pension plans and making related amendments to other Acts.

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

* * *

CORRECTIONS AND CONDITIONAL RELEASE ACT

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-350, An Act to amend the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (accountability of offenders).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to introduce an amendment to the Corrections and Conditional Release Act. The amendment would ensure that any monetary amount awarded to an offender, pursuant to legal action or proceeding, would be paid to victims and other designated beneficiaries.

The amendment would ensure victims of crimes came first and criminals would not profit from crimes.

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

* * *

PETITIONS

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present two petitions this morning.

The first one is with regard to the atmospheric ozone layer, which is critical to life on Earth through its regulation of ultraviolet radiation from the sun.

Routine Proceedings

The ninth meeting of the parties to the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer is being held next week, in Bali. Canada's commitments to ozone monitoring and science under the convention and the government's commitment will no doubt be questioned.

The petitioners call upon the Minister of the Environment to develop a plan to ensure the integrity of the ozone monitoring program and commission a report to assess the adequacy of Canadian contributions to the global observing system for climate in support of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

• (1010)

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am also pleased to present a petition regarding chronic cerebrospinal venous insufficiency, or CCSVI.

Fifteen thousand procedures have now been performed in 60 countries. Patients report reduced brain fog and fatigue, and improved circulation and motor skills, as demonstrated through improved EDSS scores. Dr. Mehta studied 150 consecutive MS patients who showed more than a 25% increase in quality of life scores a year after the procedure.

The petitioners are calling for the Minister of Health to consult experts actively engaged in diagnosis and treatment of CCSVI to undertake phase III clinical trials on an urgent basis in multiple centres across Canada and to require follow-up care.

* * *

QUESTIONS PASSED AS ORDERS FOR RETURNS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if Questions Nos. 167, 170, 171 and 172 could be made orders for returns, these returns would be tabled immediately.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Text]

Question No. 167—**Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe:**

With regard to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada funding in the riding of Pierrefonds—Dollard for the last five fiscal years: (a) what is the total amount of spending by (i) year, (ii) program; and (b) what is the amount of each spending item by (i) Technical Assistance and Foreign-Based Cooperative Activities (International Trade and Labour Program), (ii) Skills Link (Youth Employment Strategy), (iii) Consultation and Partnership-Building and Canadian-Based Cooperative Activities (International Trade and Labour Program), (iv) Canada Summer Jobs (Youth Employment Strategy), (v) Children and Families (Social Development Partnerships Program), (vi) Labour Market Development Agreements, (vii) Labour Market Agreements, (viii) Labour Market Agreements for Persons with Disabilities, (ix) Enabling Fund for Official Language Minority Communities, (x) Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities, (xi) Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment, (xii) Enabling Accessibility Fund, (xiii) Skills and Partnership Fund—Aboriginal, (xiv) Targeted Initiative for Older Workers, (xv) International Academic Mobility Initiative—Canada-European Union Program for Co-operation in Higher Education, Training and Youth, (xvi) International Academic Mobility Initiative—Program for North American Mobility in Higher Education, (xvii) Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative, (xviii) International Labour Institutions in which Canada Participates (International Trade and Labour Program), (xix) Labour Mobility, (xx) New Horizons for Seniors, (xxi) Career Focus (Youth Employment Strategy), (xxii) Fire Safety Organizations, (xxiii) Organizations that Write

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(Return tabled)

*Routine Proceedings***Question No. 170—Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:**

With regard to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada funding in the riding of Beauséjour for the last five fiscal years: (a) what is the total amount of spending by (i) year, (ii) program; and (b) what is the amount of each spending item by (i) Technical Assistance and Foreign-Based Cooperative Activities (International Trade and Labour Program), (ii) Skills Link (Youth Employment Strategy), (iii) Consultation and Partnership-Building and Canadian-Based Cooperative Activities (International Trade and Labour Program), (iv) Canada Summer Jobs (Youth Employment Strategy), (v) Children and Families (Social Development Partnerships Program), (vi) Labour Market Development Agreements, (vii) Labour Market Agreements, (viii) Labour Market Agreements for Persons with Disabilities, (ix) Enabling Fund for Official Language Minority Communities, (x) Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities, (xi) Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment, (xii) Enabling Accessibility Fund, (xiii) Skills and Partnership Fund—Aboriginal, (xiv) Targeted Initiative for Older Workers, (xv) International Academic Mobility Initiative—Canada-European Union Program for Co-operation in Higher Education, Training and Youth, (xvi) International Academic Mobility Initiative—Program for North American Mobility in Higher Education, (xvii) Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative, (xviii) International Labour Institutions in which Canada Participates (International Trade and Labour Program), (xix) Labour Mobility, (xx) New Horizons for Seniors, (xxi) Career Focus (Youth Employment Strategy), (xxii) Fire Safety Organizations, (xxiii) Organizations that Write Occupational Health and Safety Standards, (xxiv) Social Development Partnerships Program—Disability, (xxv) Foreign Credential Recognition Program Loans (pilot project), (xxvi) Fire Prevention Canada, (xxvii) Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program, (xxviii) Canada-European Union Program for Co-operation in Higher Education, Training and Youth (International Academic Mobility Initiative), (xxix) Labour-Management Partnerships Program, (xxx) Social Development Partnerships Program—Children and Families, (xxxi) Social Development Partnerships Program—Disability, (xxxii) Foreign Credential Recognition Program, (xxxiii) International Trade and Labour Program—Technical Assistance and Foreign-Based Cooperative Activities, (xxxiv) International Trade and Labour Program—Consultation and Partnership-Building and Canadian-Based Cooperative Activities, (xxxv) International Trade and Labour Program—International Labour Institutions in which Canada Participates, (xxxvi) Sector Council Program, (xxxvii) Federal Public Sector Youth Internship Program (Youth Employment Strategy), (xxxviii) Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership Program, (xxxix) Employment Programs—Career Development Services Research, (xl) Career Development Services Research (Employment Programs), (xli) Occupational Health and Safety, (xlii) Youth Awareness, (xliii) Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy, (xliv) Homelessness Partnering Strategy, (xlv) Youth Employment Strategy—Skills Link, (xlvi) Youth Employment Strategy—Canada Summer Jobs, (xlvii) Youth Employment Strategy—Career Focus, (xlviii) Youth Employment Strategy—Federal Public Sector Youth Internship Program, (xlix) Apprenticeship Completion Grant, (l) Apprenticeship Incentive Grant, (li) Work-Sharing, (lii) Small Project Component (Enabling Accessibility Fund)?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 171—Mr. Andrew Cash:

With regard to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada funding in the riding of Davenport for the last five fiscal years: (a) what is the total amount of spending by (i) year, (ii) program; and (b) what is the amount of each spending item by (i) Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (ASEP), (ii) Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy, (iii) Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund, (iv) Adult Learning Literacy and Essential Skills Program, (v) Apprenticeship Completion Grant, (vi) Apprenticeship Incentive Grant, (vii) Career Development Services Research (Employment Programs), (viii) Canada—European Union Program for Cooperation in Higher Education, Training and Youth (International Academic Mobility Program), (ix) Canada Summer Jobs (Youth Employment Strategy Program), (x) Career Focus (Youth Employment Strategy Program), (xi) Children and Families (Social Development Partnerships Program), (xii) Contributions for Consultation and Partnership-Building and Canadian-Based Cooperative Activities (International Trade and Labour Program), (xiii) Disability Component (Social Development Partnerships Program), (xiv) Employment Programs—Career Development Services Research, (xv) Enabling Accessibility Fund, (xvi) Enabling Fund for Official Language Minority Communities, (xvii) Federal Public Service Youth Internship Program (Youth Employment Strategy Program), (xviii) Fire Prevention Grants, (xix) Fire Safety Organizations, (xx) Foreign Credential Recognition Program, (xxi) Homelessness Partnering Strategy, (xxii) International Academic Mobility—Canada—European Union Program for Cooperation in Higher Education, Training and Youth, (xxiii) International Academic

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(Return tabled)

Question No. 172—Mr. Andrew Cash:

With regard to the Toronto Airport Rail Link: (a) what is the total volume of correspondence received by the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and by departments for which the minister is responsible calling for the electrification of the rail line from (i) individuals, (ii) organizations, (iii) elected officials; (b) what is the total number of petition signatures received by the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and by departments for which the minister is responsible calling for the electrification of the rail line; (c) what are the names and addresses of all organizations in (a); (d) since 2006, what reports has the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and the departments for which the minister is responsible produced or received regarding (i) the health impacts of diesel trains in urban centres, (ii) the benefits of electrification of the urban rail, (iii) the noise pollution of diesel trains; (e) what, if any, federal funding has been provided for the Toronto Airport Rail Link; (f) if federal funding was provided for the Toronto Airport Rail Link, were any conditions put in place requiring the electrification of the rail line; and (g) what is the government's position on making the electrification of urban rail lines a condition for receiving federal funding for transit projects contained within an urban area?

(Return tabled)

[English]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I ask that the remaining questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

*Business of Supply***GOVERNMENT ORDERS***[English]***BUSINESS OF SUPPLY**

OPPOSITION MOTION—ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.) moved:

That the House call on the Government of Canada to address on an urgent basis the needs of those First Nations communities whose members have no access to clean, running water in their homes; that action to address this disparity begin no later than spring 2012; and that the House further recognize that the absence of this basic requirement represents a continuing affront to our sense of justice and fairness as Canadians.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for St. Paul's.

It would be nice if we did not have to debate this issue, but we have to recognize that Canadians live, unfortunately, in very different conditions, depending on where they live. A continuing affront to our sense of wholeness, justice and fairness as Canadians is the fact that members of first nations communities and other aboriginal communities across the country are living in conditions of deep poverty and great hardship. The most telling reflection of this hardship is the fact that there are hundreds of communities which do not have access to clean running water at the present time.

I have a personal reflection on this because at the time that I led a government in Ontario, the provincial government made a decision that it was not going to tolerate this situation in our own province. Although it was, strictly speaking, outside our jurisdiction, we negotiated with the federal government a cost-sharing agreement in which Ontario, even though it did not have to, would contribute to infrastructure to ensure that people living in first nations communities would have access to clean running water, flush toilets, sewage treatment, and housing and the basic conditions of life which make a difference.

I spoke with Premier Selinger in Manitoba. He told me that he would be interested in negotiating a similar agreement with the federal government, but that the federal government was not expressing an interest in dealing with this question on an urgent basis. He signalled to me that his government was not going to do it without the support of the federal government, which is not an unreasonable position for him to take. However, if the federal government were willing, the Province of Manitoba would be willing to step up to the plate and contribute to making a difference to the first nations people who are living in northern Manitoba.

It really is quite extraordinary that the federal government has not taken up such an offer. It is not every day that a provincial government says it is prepared to spend money outside its jurisdiction in order to deal with a deep humanitarian problem. The federal government has said that it is prepared to change the regulations that would increase the requirements for first nations governments on the question of clean drinking water. However, that approach flies in the face of the recommendations the government has received from an expert panel that it appointed. That expert panel said to deal with the resources first and then the regulations.

●(1015)

[Translation]

The principle is very simple. We believe that all Canadians, regardless of where in Canada they live—whether it is in the north, the south or elsewhere in the country—have a fundamental right to have access to drinking water and that they also have the right to adequate water facilities. As Canadians, we refuse to accept that people live in such conditions of poverty, when we talk about Canada as a fair and just country. There is a contradiction there that the Liberal Party can no longer accept.

[English]

This is not a motion that is intended to engage us in partisan debate. I hope the government can find a way to support it.

The government may want to spend the day making partisan speeches saying that the Liberal government did not do this or that. We can all recognize that not everything was done that should have been done, but that is not the point.

The point is now we have clear public statements from the expert panel to which I have referred, chaired by Dr. Harry Swain who was a well-known deputy minister in the Government of Canada. We have the reports of the former auditor general, Sheila Fraser.

[Translation]

These reports from the Auditor General directly address the unacceptable living conditions in this country's first nations communities.

[English]

We have reports coming out as recently as this week indicating just how unacceptable it is for our country. As of 2010, 116 first nations reserve communities across Canada are under a drinking water advisory with a mean average duration of 343 days. Lack of access to clean drinking water presents a serious health threat to first nations reserve communities, creating a higher likelihood of disease and infection transmission, and poorer overall health outcomes.

We can look back to the 19th century and ask what explains the dramatic improvement in the living conditions of working people all across Europe, what accounted for a tremendous extension of life for working people in the middle of the 19th century. It was clean drinking water and sewage treatment. Those are the two things that made a profound difference to the health of ordinary people.

I can see many colleagues in the House, and all of us can speak of our travels. I remember one trip when I was in provincial politics in the 1980s to the communities recognized by my colleague from Timmins. It had an impact on me, and when I became premier I said that if we did nothing else, we had to take steps to make sure that we improved the basic living conditions and the infrastructure for the people living in Attawapiskat and Kashechewan and the communities on the shores of James Bay in the province of Ontario.

Business of Supply

There is not a single member in this House who would not be equally affected by visiting the northern reserves right across this country. Members would find isolated conditions, people living in poverty, housing conditions that are unacceptable by any standard. Too many people are falling sick because they do not have access to something quite basic and fundamental, safe, clean drinking water.

Let us think about Canada, the country of clean water, the country of beautiful lakes, the country of flowing rivers. Is this a country that cannot provide the basics of life to its own people? Is this a country that says it will pass regulations but it will not provide the resources?

It is something we cannot accept, and we insist that it be changed.

• (1020)

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Madam Speaker, I understand the umbrage that comes forward from the leader of the third party. I understand the substance of the motion. We will support this motion. It is a good motion from the standpoint that we all are in agreement that the current standards are unacceptable. The situation in first nation communities across the country in too many cases is unacceptable.

However, I do have a real issue with the attitude that is displayed. When I was sitting here in opposition for 13 years, in year 12, the government of the day sent the army into Kashechewan because it had not dealt with the fact that the community outfall was above the water intake. That is the kind of behaviour and lip service we saw from the Liberal administration, which I find unacceptable.

Hon. Bob Rae: Madam Speaker, you may be surprised and so may the minister by my response to that. I think we all recognize that more could and should have been done. I do not come into the House with this motion with any sense of partisan superiority. There is not a government in this country that can look at itself and ask if it has done everything possible to deal with this situation.

We all know the circumstances that have existed in the past. What we are asking the House to do is to say that these are conditions that cannot be allowed to continue. If it makes the Conservatives feel better all day to simply say that the Liberals did not do anything over a period of time, they can go ahead. We have a defence to that. We can show members what we have done. I pointed to an area where the Liberal government of the day and the New Democratic government in Ontario were able to agree on an infrastructure program in northern Ontario that actually made a difference, that actually fixed some problems.

I encourage the minister to take the same practical approach as we go forward.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to hear that our communities of Kashechewan and Attawapiskat are being referred to because they are the epicentres of Canada's shame on the international stage for what is happening. As we speak, there is a state of emergency in Attawapiskat. There are families who are dumping waste out of buckets in the streets. That is happening under the current government. It happened in Kashechewan under the last government.

As Premier of Ontario, he talked about the province getting involved. After Walkerton, we saw the province establish standards that affected water standards right down to cottages and to campgrounds, but those water standards end at the reserves. These are citizens of Ontario. People have seen the federal government's years of neglect. The member has spoken with the premier of Manitoba. Would he speak with Premier Dalton McGuinty and say that if the federal government will not protect the citizens of Ontario, that the province will step in and ensure that the guarantee of clean drinking water, fire standards and education will be maintained because these are citizens who are being denied their basic rights?

Hon. Bob Rae: Madam Speaker, I have no hesitation in answering positively to that suggestion. I am prepared to talk to anyone on this question. Every government must be involved in trying to find a solution. We can all point fingers but the fact is that it is a clear federal responsibility to deal with conditions on reserve. I can only tell the hon. member what I did when I was in a position to do something about it. I know that is what the Liberal Party did when we had a chance to do something about it.

Instead of pointing fingers, we need to ask ourselves how we can continue as one country. How can we look ourselves in the mirror and say that we are one country when there are people living in conditions that would be completely unacceptable to anyone who is a member of this House? Any member of the House visiting a community like that would wonder how this has been allowed to go on. It will cost money. It will take resources. It will require training. It takes a change and we think it is time for that change to happen right here. It is time to do it.

• (1025)

[Translation]

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank my leader for his passionate speech, for his leadership and for giving us the opportunity to discuss this issue that is very important to all Canadians.

[English]

My friend, the member for Mount Royal, used the phrase “the mobilization of shame”, and that is really what today's debate is about. When Canadians see those posters in the washrooms about washing their hands, we hope they think about those people who do not even have running water to wash their hands. I feel embarrassed as a Canadian. What I have found throughout my riding of St. Paul's and across this country is that all Canadians are increasingly embarrassed about the third world conditions in which so many of our first peoples live.

It is important to recall what happened two years ago during H1N1. It is no coincidence that the communities, which ended up on the list of no running water, were the very communities devastated by the impact of H1N1. People in Canada came to know the names of St. Theresa Point, Garden Hill, Red Sucker Lake and Wasagamack because those were the communities with air transport taking out their citizens and too many of them not returning.

Business of Supply

In Lessons Learned, we saw that, in the first wave, significant pressure was put on air ambulances when 76 patients required air transfer from their northern communities. In 383 hospitalizations, 71 patients were admitted to intensive care and there were 11 deaths due to H1N1 flu in those northern Manitoba communities, even though, in the report on H1N1, first nations communities in Manitoba and northern Ontario being hit by a highly communicable H1N1 virus. Despite being just 10% of the population in Manitoba, natives made up one-third of the 685 swine flu cases in that province. As our leader said, about 1,000 homes in northern Manitoba still have no running water and many of these homes have no plumbing of any kind.

During that time, we went to visit some of these communities. I think all Canadians need to, in some way, be with us on that journey, to walk into a home and see, where there ought to be a kitchen sink, a turquoise bowl filled with the water from last night's dishes because there is no place to put that grey water. People need to wait until the next water delivery comes. Or, walk into the outhouse that these people have to use all winter long. It is just inexcusable in a country as rich as Canada. I do not think there is one Canadian who thinks this should continue and that this is not an urgent problem.

When our government fell in 2005, we had just received the report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development. As others have said today, I, too, was in cabinet during the embarrassment and tragedy of Kashechewan. We know we need to do more but, unfortunately, that was six years ago.

Since then, we have had the report by the expert panel on safe drinking water for first nations and the safe drinking water for first nations Senate report, chaired by the Hon. Gerry St. Germain, a Conservative senator, in which the conclusion reached states:

Legislation to regulate water standards on reserve is required. No one, including this Committee, argues differently. Regulations are, however, only part of the answer. Sustained investment in the capacity of First Nations community water systems and of those running the systems is absolutely essential to ensure First Nations people on-reserve enjoy safe drinking water. Without this investment, we risk introducing a regulatory regime that burdens communities and does little to help them meet legislated standards.

Unfortunately, the government has come forward with only an interest in legislation and no commitment for the resources to actually meet the standards that would be put forth in those regulations.

Then, in 2008, we had the devastating status report of the Auditor General of Canada in the House of Commons in Chapter 4—Programs for First Nations on Reserves.

• (1030)

We then had the national assessment on first nations' water and waste water systems which, members will be appalled to learn, was available in April 2011 but was hidden by the government until after the election. I think the Conservatives knew that all Canadians would have been appalled.

We then have the recent Waterproof 3, Canada's drinking water report card, in which the province of Ontario gets an A and the federal government gets an F. As my colleague from Timmins—James Bay has said, this is because the kind of report carding for provinces stops at the border of the reserve.

It says in that report that clean water is not just an environmental issue, that it is a health issue and a human rights issue. While the federal government now acknowledges the human right to water, it has not taken any steps to make that a reality for the people who live in this country.

This time last year, the Government of Canada signed the declaration for indigenous people wherein there is a responsibility on housing, sanitation, health and social security, and yet it has done nothing.

In September, we wrote to the minister and asked him to do something and explained that we would not be able to support any legislation that did not come with the resources that were necessary.

I believe that we, having written today's motion, need to amend it. In talking with first nations and the opposition, I now wish to move, seconded by the member for Lac-Saint-Louis:

That the motion be amended by replacing the words “no later than the spring of 2012” with the word “forthwith”.

The Deputy Speaker: It is my duty to inform the members that an amendment to an opposition motion may be moved only with the consent of the sponsor of the motion. Therefore, I ask the hon. member for Toronto Centre if he consents to this amendment being moved?

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Yes, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: The amendment is in order. Questions and comments. The hon. member for Timmins—James Bay.

• (1035)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to say at the outset how pleased I am that the Liberal Party has amended its motion. We, in the New Democratic Party, have been pushing the issue of clean drinking water for many years and the need to recognize that this is an immediate crisis, not just something that can be put off, even for days.

At the present time, there is a state of emergency in the community of Attawapiskat. I visited with a doctor from the Weeneebayko health authority last week who said that these children and elders were now at immediate risk of life in the community from the lack of sanitation. Children have open sores on their bodies from being exposed to toilet waste that is being dumped in ditches.

I would like to ask the member what she thinks about a situation where a government has money for all manner of priorities except for first nations children. We see it in education and in housing. We see again and again the sense that there are two classes of people in this country and that one class of first nations children are continually considered nonentities. What does that say about our country? What does that say about the Parliament of Canada at this time?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Madam Speaker, I am saddened that the Minister of Health has never visited any of these communities. The Arctic is a very different place from the places on reserve. During the H1N1 crisis there were no visits.

We need leadership from the federal government. This affects many government departments. The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs cannot do this on his own. The First Nations Inuit Health Branch also needs to provide some leadership. It is a tragedy. I urge the Minister of Health to visit these communities, particularly Attawapiskat, to see first-hand the action that must be taken by the government.

[Translation]

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Madam Speaker, the honourable leader of the third party in this House spoke a great deal about the federal government's responsibility in this regard. The hon. member just spoke about Kashechewan—I hope that I pronounced that correctly. According to our research, the water quality was so bad there at the time that residents had to be evacuated. The Liberals' first reaction was to argue with the provincial government about whose responsibility this was. It is therefore a bit surprising to see their reaction today.

In the hon. member's opinion, how is the position of our friends in the third party different now with regard to the federal government's responsibility? Should they have taken action at the time rather than arguing with the province?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Madam Speaker, I hope that this question is not a history lesson. It is a priority for the future. When our government was in office, the situation in Kashechewan was not very pretty. The Kashechewan First Nation must move communities to one location near a river and train its people on how to manage drinking water systems. I hope that, today, all the members of this House agree that the situation is urgent and that action must be taken immediately.

[English]

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am a little astounded with some of the things that have been said here. Since we became government, we have put in place all of the things that needed to be addressed in a comprehensive way in order to make real progress in terms of advancing to the point where first nations will have the same water standards and quality as other Canadians have.

I am acutely aware of one thing. We were operating from a 2001 national assessment done under the previous administration. A lot of our discussion has revolved around the Island Lakes region in Manitoba and the fact that many homes in that area do not have piped water and sewers. Very conveniently, the 2001 national assessment done under the previous government only looked at communities with piped water and sewers. We chose to do a complete and comprehensive survey, the Neegan Burnside study. I released the results of that survey this year.

Government does not enter into an exercise like that unless it is prepared to deal with criticism. Obviously, the more comprehensive the survey is, the more problems that are going to be identified.

Since 2006, we have invested \$2.5 billion on first nations water and waste water systems. Every year we have invested more than the previous government by quite a long shot, yet we keep hearing that somehow we are not prepared to make the investment but we want the regulations. I find that to be very hypocritical.

Business of Supply

I would like to talk about the first nations infrastructure investment plan. This is something we develop annually in partnership with first nations. We have ongoing A-base funding of roughly \$1 billion a year under the capital facilities and maintenance program. We are earmarking the largest percentage, approximately 45%, of that asset area for water and sewer.

In addition, we are working with communities that have been mentioned both by my colleague from Timmins—James Bay and my colleague from St. Paul's. We are doing a lot more in these communities than we are being given credit for. As a matter of fact, we are going to be making real progress in the short term on those. For that reason, I have no difficulty with the amendment that has been put forward by the member for St. Paul's because we are on it.

● (1040)

I agree that residents of first nations communities should have access to safe, clean and reliable drinking water. I have significant experience in my professional history prior to becoming a member of Parliament on which to base that belief.

Our government has devoted much time, energy, and taxpayer dollars to addressing the issue. We inherited a backlog of high risk water systems from the previous government. We addressed those high risk systems that were identified by the 2001 assessment, which we now know from the national assessment we commissioned and reported on this year was woefully lacking. We have more issues out there than what we originally believed.

When we formed government, we collaborated with the Assembly of First Nations to begin to implement a plan of action on first nations drinking water. While considerable progress has been made, as I have described, much work does remain to be done.

There are complex factors that contribute to the problem. It is absolutely unacceptable that first nations communities are not protected by the same standards of drinking water as other Canadians are. As minister, I have been clear and consistent on this point. The national chief has been clear on this point as well. He described the situation before the Senate standing committee looking into the issue this way:

When children and their families are not able to trust the drinking water, there is no safety or security.

I agree wholeheartedly with that statement.

Most Canadians trust the quality of their drinking water. The foundation for this trust is a regulatory framework, clearly defined responsibilities and protocols enshrined in law. The legal framework applying to municipalities, provinces and territories, along with public health agencies and utilities, prescribes specific roles, but no such legal framework exists for the vast majority of first nations communities.

There was reference to various reports by various bodies. A Senate standing committee in 2007 concluded with the simple statement that legislation to regulate water standards on reserve is required.

Business of Supply

Every independent group that has studied the matter in any depth has reached a similar conclusion. The framework currently in place is clearly inadequate. The two major components of the current policy framework are protocols for safe drinking water on reserves and guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality. These documents are undoubtedly valuable, but they have no legal basis. The policy is not legally binding and it does not support full accountability.

The Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development completed a study of first nations drinking water. The study looked at the joint initiative launched in 2003 by Health Canada and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. According to the report, the 2003 initiative suffered from an inherent flaw: the absence of clear performance indicators and accountability mechanisms. Part 5 of the commissioner's report reads in part, "It's not clear who is ultimately accountable for the safety of drinking water".

Further on, the report states:

[U]ntil a regulatory regime comparable with that in provinces is in place, INAC and Health Canada cannot ensure that First Nations people living on reserves have continuing access to safe drinking water.

The commissioner made five recommendations: create a federal regulatory regime for drinking water on reserve; clarify design codes and standards; ensure monitoring and follow-up; create institutions for capacity building; and provide progress reports to Parliament.

● (1045)

We are continuing to take action on each of these recommendations. Clearly we must set the bar higher for water and waste water systems in first nations communities. Without clear standards and assigned responsibilities, we cannot hope to succeed. That is why we introduced legislation on this subject in the last Parliament and why we will introduce similar legislation in this Parliament. We have worked diligently for over a year with first nations partners on developing acceptable legislation, and we have made a commitment that we will continue to work in a collaborative way in the regulatory process flowing from the legislation.

The proposed legislation aims to make use of the expertise of provincial and territorial regimes. The regulations would be enabled by a new federal law on safe drinking water for first nations. The legislation would leverage existing regimes, along with the considerable expertise and experience of provincial and territorial officials, to establish appropriate regulations adapted to the needs of first nations communities in each region.

The legislation would bring us a giant step closer to our larger goal: that residents of first nations enjoy the same protections afforded other Canadians when it comes to safe, clean and reliable drinking water, and the effective treatment of waste water.

I will return to the conclusion of the report by the Senate committee that looked into this:

Regulations are, however, only part of the answer. Sustained investment in the capacity of First Nations community water systems and of those running the systems is absolutely essential to ensure First Nations people on-reserve enjoy safe drinking water.

We can have the best infrastructure in the world, but if we do not have the appropriate certified and trained operators to run the system, we are at great risk of something going wrong. Therefore,

we are making major investments in operator training and certification as well as infrastructure. Those are the two prime areas.

We are working with first nations, and provincial and territorial officials because they have first-hand experience. They know what works and what does not. They know how to make water and waste water treatment facilities work. This is what we need to do to craft an effective regulatory regime.

I mentioned earlier that between 2006 and 2012, the Government of Canada will have invested approximately \$2.5 billion in first nations water and waste water infrastructure and capacity. Some 130 major projects were completed in the four fiscal years ending March 2010. These projects included expansions to existing water and waste water systems; construction of new systems, storage facilities and pumping stations; expansion of distribution and collection networks; and development of subdivision lots with water and sewer servicing. However, until an adequate legal framework is in place to support them, there is significant risk to these projects.

The national assessment was a very time-consuming exercise, because we have 633 communities across the country. Many of them are small and dispersed, with multiple water and sewer distribution systems, including individual wells and septic systems. Nearly 60% of the communities have 500 or fewer residents.

● (1050)

That is why we must have regular and frequent sampling and testing of water to ensure public safety. We need the legislative framework and accountability networks to be in place. Otherwise, we have no assurance that the treatment and distribution system can ensure safe, clean and reliable drinking water.

● (1055)

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Madam Speaker, there is no question that a better regulatory regime is an important objective. As I said in my earlier comments, this is not about trying to score one point against another.

I want to ask the minister about the conversation I had with Premier Selinger just a few days ago. He indicated, and it was not something the premier was telling me privately but something he said in the legislature, that the Province of Manitoba was prepared to sign the same kind of joint agreement as was signed between Ontario and the federal government to deal with the infrastructure needs of the communities that do not have access to running water now.

I wonder if the minister could tell us if the Government of Canada is prepared to contemplate entering into such an agreement.

Hon. John Duncan: Madam Speaker, I have had multiple discussions with the minister of aboriginal affairs in Manitoba. Our government did sign a comprehensive agreement on flooding and flood proofing. We all know of the very tragic stories emanating from Manitoba because of flooding this year, and the federal response has been very good on that.

Business of Supply

In my discussions with the aboriginal affairs minister on the Island Lakes region, the homes that were built with no capacity for accepting running water and toilet facilities were an issue. We have agreed to collaborate through HRSDC programming and some provincial input to make some changes there. We are also looking at some other progress that we think we can make very early, perhaps starting this year, in upgrading some of those same homes.

I do not know the details of what the agreement was between Ontario and the federal government, but without knowing the details I can say that we are very willing to collaborate and co-operate with the Province of Manitoba. I am very optimistic. There was also involvement with the Mennonite community. Both the federal and provincial authorities were embracing that thought process and that organization as well.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Madam Speaker, I listened with great interest to my hon. colleague when he talked about 2005 when the army was sent into Kashechewan. I was there during that evacuation and we would all agree that it was one of the low points for Canada in terms of our failing the first nations communities.

I have worked with the minister on the issue of getting fire services into Kashechewan. We have worked on the Attawapiskat school situation. I have talked to him about the ongoing crisis in Attawapiskat. I appreciate that there is a working team in place and right now the plan is to dedicate \$500,000 to try to remediate badly condemned homes. If a house is abandoned in Attawapiskat, it is pretty much beyond the pale of anything one would imagine anywhere else.

I am concerned about the immediate risk in Attawapiskat, the lack of services and inability to deal with the fact that people are facing health risks due to the dumping of toilet waste because they have no running water. I would ask the minister if, as part of the Attawapiskat working group, he would bring in a health team and direct his bureaucrats to work with the community to address the immediate risk that is facing these families.

I am very concerned about the risk of fire in a trailer. There are 90 people living in one trailer. If there is a fire this winter, it will be tragedy befalling all of us. I am asking the minister if he will work with us to ensure that we have a broader strategy to alleviate this so that we do not have another Kashechewan.

• (1100)

Hon. John Duncan: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague from Timmins—James Bay for the question. It seems like we do have lots of conversations.

The member's request seems most reasonable. I will talk to my colleagues and my officials about having Health Canada input into the working group that is trying to address the current issues in Attawapiskat. That was the question and I think this answer will be satisfactory to the member.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Madam Speaker, being a professional engineer, I am aware of the importance of clean water for people and the environment.

I would like to ask the hon. minister how legislation would help protect Canada's substantial investments in first nations water and waste water systems?

Hon. John Duncan: Madam Speaker, whenever we have assets that we have constructed, if they are not properly maintained, we do not get normal longevity from them.

We have houses that were constructed in first nations communities in 2006 that are now boarded up and uninhabitable. While this is not an example of water and waste water, the latter systems also require continual, ongoing monitoring and maintenance.

This is why the operator training program is so important. Much of our investment since 2006 has been in hard investment, the infrastructure investment. We need to ensure that we have protected that investment by having standards, plus the trained people to look after it. In that way we can continue to afford to make ongoing investments. Otherwise, this becomes a quagmire or quicksand, and we will never get to where we need to be.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Madam Speaker, it seems that we all agree that it is urgent that this matter be resolved and that it is also urgent that sustainable solutions be found immediately.

I would like to ask the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development if he is going to champion this cause among his health, finance and infrastructure colleagues in order to ensure that appropriate and sustainable solutions are found for aboriginal communities. I would like to know what he plans to do so that he and the colleagues that I just mentioned take immediate action.

[*English*]

Hon. John Duncan: Madam Speaker, of course I am the lead minister on this, and of course the government has made major commitments and investments and continues to do so.

We do have a plan that we are re-doing on an annual basis, as I mentioned in my speech. We do not do this in a vacuum, but we do it along with our first nations partners. That is ongoing.

The nice thing about now having the comprehensive national assessment is that we know where to set our focus and our priorities in terms of our investments. Technology is moving very quickly and is making things more affordable, not less affordable. That is good news, as well.

• (1105)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am very proud to rise today to represent the people of Timmins—James Bay. Unfortunately, the wonderful region of James Bay in Ontario is the epicentre of so much of the tragedy that we have been talking about this morning. It is of course all across Canada, but our communities seem to be pointed out.

Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my hon. colleague from Manicouagan.

Business of Supply

Right now, as we speak, there is state of emergency in the community of Attawapiskat. It is not the first state of emergency, it is the third state of emergency in the space of three years. I was there last Monday with the Weeneebayko Area Health Authority meeting with families living in tents. In one tent we met a family of six who have lived in a tent with two double beds and a couch for two years. It was pretty cool and the snow had not started. The mother said that when one daughter gets upset, she says she is going to her room. Her room is the couch.

One would have to see this situation to believe it. In another case, we were in an unheated shack that had two grandparents and a little girl sharing a bucket. The bucket was their toilet. They had to dump it in the street in front of their neighbours. On that corner there were 15 people dumping buckets in ditches. This is in Canada in 2011. If we did not see it first-hand, we not believe that this situation exists.

There are 90 people living in a trailer with six washrooms and hardly any fire exits. If a fire were to break out in that trailer over the winter, it would be a catastrophe. There is no sprinkler system. There are no fire alarms. This is the sense of urgency in Attawapiskat right now. These states of emergency do not just happen, crises do not just appear. As we have seen in Kashechewan in 2005, we had three full evacuations of one community in one year, first from E. coli and then because of the flooding. It happens because of a number of factors: chronic underfunding and poor planning.

The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs talked about houses built in 2005. They are uninhabitable. I was in Fort Albany just two years ago, where a brand new subdivision had children sick from the mould covering the walls. The houses were built on the cheap, not for the flood plains of James Bay. How can we put good money after bad? How could we have such poor planning in place that we build stuff on the cheap? The water crisis in Kashechewan was a direct result of the fact that the water plant was not built up to standards.

Beyond the poor planning and the chronic underfunding is the regulatory lapse that allows for two sets of standards, one that protects the rights of citizens across this country and then another standard that almost does not even exist for first nations people.

Let us talk about fire protection. On the James Bay coast in the far north, for police services, they did not bother to put sprinkler systems in the fire units because it costs money. That would be illegal anywhere else in the province of Ontario or Canada.

We were in the Kashechewan jail cell which looked like a makeshift crack house. The provincial minister of security went to see this place with us, but nothing was done. Two men, Jamie Goodwin and Ricardo Wesley, burned to death in that jail cell. They were screaming to get out. The police were burning their hands to get them out. They could not. There were no fire suppressions or sprinkler systems. That would be illegal anywhere else, but in first nations communities that lack of regulatory framework happens all the time.

We need to address the chronic underfunding. I am glad to hear the present Indian affairs minister talk about the need to start investing. Two years ago, in Attawapiskat, we had a sewage backup and 90 people were left homeless. The response at the time from the then Indian affairs minister was, "Tell them to just stay in their

houses". They had dirt and waste coming from their basements, and they were told to sit in their houses and wait. Those houses were not fixed. The damage started the ball rolling for the present crisis in Attawapiskat. Anywhere else in Canada there would be a response, but this is not what has been happening.

We see communities like Kashechewan and Attawapiskat reaching the breaking point. In terms of this regulatory double standard, there is a new film out called *Canada: Apartheid Nation* that is about the situation in Attawapiskat. I do not use that word lightly because the Toronto *Star* used the word "apartheid" to describe the situation for children in Attawapiskat who had been denied basic education rights that are the right of any other child in this country.

There is discrimination against first nations children in these communities. Children are going to school coming from overcrowded homes. In Attawapiskat there are 25 to 26 people in a two bedroom house. People sleep in shifts. The children go to school on a toxic wasteland in a makeshift portable. No wonder kids start dropping out in grade five.

● (1110)

Shannen Koostachin, who is from our region, talked about children who give up hope and lose hope in themselves in grades 4 and 5, and kill themselves. There is no support for those children when they are in crisis. Just this past month a youngster killed himself in southern Ontario. It was a tragedy. The nation said we have to do something.

In Moose Factory, two winters ago, 13 children killed themselves and 80 other children attempted to kill themselves. It is a town of 2,000 people. Imagine what would happen if 93 children were taken out of any community of 2,000 people to be marked for death. There would be an international outrage. What was the response? While the community was running around trying to save kids from killing themselves, the province cut the Payukotayno child welfare services because it was costing too much money.

This is the double standard that is happening. Therefore, we need to invest. I will support the government with respect to the building of water infrastructure, which has never happened before.

However, we have to address the fact that the basic rights of these community members are being denied. We do not have the proper building standards on the reserves that we have provincially. We do not have the same education standards on reserves that we have provincially. There is a chronic double standard. We do not have the same fire standards on reserves that we have in the communities.

In Kashechewan I went to the funeral of Trianna Martin, the four-year-old girl who died in a house fire. There were 27 people in that house. There was not even a fire truck to get to that little girl. This is the kind of thing that happens.

Business of Supply

As a country Canadians have a hard time believing it because we pride ourselves on our willingness to care. However, right now I have a state of emergency. I have people living in tents in one of my communities down the road from the richest diamond mine in North America. They are dumping their waste in buckets saying that they cannot go on like that any more. The doctors are saying that children will die, that something will happen. This is the extent of the crisis.

It is not just in Attawapiskat, Port Alberni, Kashechewan or Moose Factory; it is in community after community across Indian territory. It will only change when we decide to make it a priority. The greatest resource we have in the north is not the oil sands, the diamond mines or the copper mines, it is the children who come from these reserves.

If members met some of the children in communities like Attawapiskat, it would break their hearts because they have given up hope. Some young people have the power to change the world. However, if we do not give them the homes or the education and health supports that they deserve, we are wasting the greatest possible resource this country has. It is a black mark on Canada right now internationally. It has to end. It has to change.

We can talk all we want about investments and regulatory frameworks. This is not a partisan issue. It is part of the broken promise that goes all the way back to the breach with Champlain to be on a path together with our first nations communities. We will continue on that path.

In many ways over the last 10 years I have seen how that path has moved forward, but in 20 years, 30 years or 50 years, we will still be on that path. It is incumbent upon us now to fix what was done. The damage done by the residential schools should not be continuing today with children being denied basic education services. What happened in Kashechewan in 2005 should never happen again in any other community in this country.

We are on a path together. We have to get beyond the partisan fight. We have to make this a priority in this Parliament, at this time, for our children and with respect to our obligations for the future of the country.

• (1115)

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Timmins—James Bay for his passion and leadership on this issue.

This is not a criticism of the member's speech; it is a comment. I would like the member to reply with a brief comment as well.

What is missing in this discussion so far is the issue of self-government. We have to change the nature of the relationship.

Here we are debating the conditions of a sewage treatment plant or the lack of running water in a community thousands of miles away because it does not have the resources to deal with these problems. Until we create a Canada wherein we actually transfer the resources to allow people to make these decisions to get on with it themselves, we will continue this pattern of frustration and dependence, which is such a negative aspect of this whole issue we are discussing today.

We all need to figure out a way to move forward on the self-government agenda. We nearly got there at one time in our

constitutional history. However, we did not get there and, as a result, we see a huge backup in land claims, discussions and negotiations. There is great difficulty getting there.

I would ask the hon. member to comment on that.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Madam Speaker, in response to my hon. colleague, the issue of self-government is essential and it is the one other element that needs to be addressed.

When I said that I have seen elements going forward, I had the great honour to work with the Algonquin Nation in Abitibi and La Verendrye Park in northern Ontario.

Ten years ago there were blockades stopping projects. Now there are impact benefit agreements. The problem is, we need to go further. We need to get beyond the limitations of the Indian Act.

When I talk to people in Attawapiskat, they tell me how they have been handcuffed for the last 100 years by the Indian Act. Some 150 years ago it was the Hudson Bay factor and then it was the Indian agent, but now it is the INAC bureaucrats. They are all the same guy, and they all have their finger holding down these communities.

We have to re-establish a broader political relationship and we will see change, but in order to do that, we need to ensure resources and we need to ensure that there are education opportunities, that there are training opportunities, and that they have the resources to become fully able to handle the communities because they know what the issues are and they know the solutions.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member, who spoke with such passion. I am very familiar with his passion and empathy for the aboriginal communities in his riding. However, I think that he speaks for all aboriginal communities and even for all the forgotten people in our very prosperous country.

I would like him to provide more details because he addressed a number of issues. It is not just a matter of infrastructure; there are many other areas affected. I would therefore like him to speak more about the importance of having a strategy that truly helps these communities in a sustainable way.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus: Madam Speaker, there are many broader issues that will be spoken to over the day. We need to inspire and we need to be inspired by the young people. They are the future.

I tell the story again and again of Shannen Koostachin and the young people of Attawapiskat. What they have done, from putting a face to the forgotten faces of first nations children, has changed the debate in this country forever. They are not just heroes of first nations communities, they are heroes to kids across this country.

The older people in the House probably do not realize how much change is happening on the ground, but if they go into a public school anywhere in this country and ask about what the kids on the James Bay coast have done on education rights, any kid will be able to tell them that story.

Business of Supply

It is happening with the young people. We have to have heroes; we have to have role models. I have seen children in communities who start to give up hope because they do not think they can make a difference. That is how much we have internalized the damage, but there is real positive change happening.

We have great leaders. We need to work with them and give them the tools they need, and again, education, education, education. Every child needs the right, as Shannen said, to go to a safe and comfy school because when they have that educational opportunity, we will see northern Canada transformed in a way that it could never have been transformed otherwise.

● (1120)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain (Manicouagan, NDP): Madam Speaker, considering the ethnological concepts that will be addressed in this speech, it is important to provide some context in which to frame the intellectual exercise about to take place.

Having spent the past few months in this House and at a number of different meetings of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, today I can offer some underlying reasons for the almost total lack of aboriginal popular support for Canada's political dynamic.

The first nations' historical passiveness toward the democratic process, as observed in this House, reflects a desire to distance themselves from the utilitarian relationship that has gradually developed between the aboriginal communities and the Canadian government. When I talk about a utilitarian relationship, of course I am talking about it in a purely pernicious sense since, too often, aboriginal identity issues are used for advancing some sort of political platform.

It seems that too often the socio-cultural issues of the first nations are brought to the public's attention only if there are political gains to be made by the various parties sitting in this House.

This perception stems from certain aboriginal apprehensions associated with the fraudulent manoeuvres of supposedly bygone days and is fuelled mainly by a strong sense of powerlessness against a system that is removed from the social realities of contemporary tribal communities.

I am deliberately putting the emphasis on the concept of "community" since my argument focuses mainly on the living conditions of Indians living on reserves. I differentiate between Indians living on and off reserve because during the last committee meeting, a representative of the commission on aboriginal peoples indicated that there was a certain inequity, there were certain noticeable differences between the living conditions of Indians living in urban centres off reserves and those living on reserve. I am emphasizing that difference today.

For six months now, I have been doing my best to introduce my colleagues to a culturally relevant vision of the Indian issues that enter into our debates and parliamentary work. This has led me to comment on certain statements made by my colleagues on issues such as access to housing and essential services for remote reserves in Canada.

I am bringing this up today in connection with the comment made by the hon. member who spoke before me. At the beginning of the week he sent me a press release on the situation as experienced by members of the Attawapiskat community.

He began by saying that aboriginals living in that community are now reduced to living in camps. In response, I jokingly said—jokes are a typical Innu way of changing the subject and defusing the tension—that aboriginal communities have been living in camps for 30,000 years. There is nothing new under the sun. But what is distressing is that this is not a choice for these communities; they are being forced into it out of necessity. I feel that this is a sorry state of affairs in 2011 since access to basic services should go hand in hand with the notion of being a Canadian citizen.

It is sometimes wise to boil ideas down to their most basic concept. This is one tactic, one characteristic of my nation—we always try to return to traditional reasoning when faced with a difficult situation. Often, we find solutions to uncomfortable situations in the community.

This vision, which is part of the community I come from, is extremely useful when looking at possible solutions to the daily problems faced by the Innu nation. It is one of the reasons that we ask questions of elders, who take on the task of applying a traditional vision when it comes to contentious issues and issues of identity. And when I say contentious, I mean situations that pit certain community members against one another.

● (1125)

In the past, we used a consensus process; it was a type of community justice. If there were disputes between people in the community, this process resolved many issues in the end. There was an adversarial aspect: people would openly state the problem and a solution would often be found through collaboration.

That said, even those with ancestral knowledge, the elders, within my home community fully realize that they cannot completely dismiss modern socio-economic realities when looking at the living conditions of band members. That is why I must agree with the argument presented by my colleagues who say that access to the basic commodities, such as running water, potable water in fact, is one of the intrinsic rights of a Canadian citizen.

The simple fact that nearly 2,000 aboriginal households in Canada do not have access to running water illustrates the urgency of the situation. This alone is enough to justify a unified effort by all levels of government in order to address this matter of national interest. Needless to say, it is the federal government's duty to preserve human dignity in this country. In that regard and under international law, drinking water is recognized as essential and a prerequisite to exercising human rights. Without drinking water, exercising human rights would be rather difficult, since, after two or three days, there would no longer be any humans.

Business of Supply

With that in mind, in my speech I plan to highlight certain industry practices that specifically affect the integrity of water resources in Canada's isolated communities. Exploration and mining activities north of the 50th parallel present a significant risk in terms of contamination of groundwater, which is vital to isolated communities that have only limited recourses when it comes to access to drinking water. I am addressing the issue from the perspective of the 50th parallel because it is relevant to my culture and my background. Many resource exploration initiatives are taking place at this time, either near or north of the 50th parallel. History shows that these lands are inhabited mainly by remote aboriginal communities that are cut off from the rest of the world.

I emphasize this little-known aspect—the harmful impact of industrial practices on the living conditions in aboriginal communities—because many instances of damage and deterioration in first nations' water resources have been brought to my attention in the context of my job. In fact, I plan to go to Kitigan Zibi over the weekend—along with one of my colleagues whom this concerns directly, since the community is in his riding—in order to address some concerns raised by residents there. I will be able to shed some light on the situation and update the House when I return.

My brief experience in this Parliament leads me to believe that the current political and economic climate favours the indiscriminate extraction of mineral resources in remote regions. This suits the unfortunate plans of an all-powerful industry that cares nothing for the concept of corporate social responsibility because each social unit north of the 50th parallel is so isolated. With this speech I am giving notice that I will be keeping an eye on industry practices in traditional first nations territories. Damage to the water resources in isolated communities is just one of the adverse effects of putting economic interests first in this country.

I assure the House that I will use all means at my disposal to ensure that social and environmental considerations will temper the initiatives put forward by a government which, through wilful blindness fueled by purely mercantile considerations, is contributing to the ruin and perdition of the nation.

• (1130)

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Madam Speaker, I truly appreciate the concrete examples provided by my colleague. He always gives speeches that reflect his community. He said that governments do not acknowledge the importance of working with the Assembly of First Nations. In 2010, the Prime Minister abstained from the vote that would recognize the right to water and sanitation of the Assembly of First Nations. We are talking more about water quality. In addition to harming the health of first nations, the Conservative government's decisions also harm the environment. Environment Canada's budget was drastically cut this year, which will lead to less monitoring of drinking water quality, not to mention the impact of industrial infrastructure. How does my colleague feel about that?

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question. If the considerations and concerns raised by the AFNQL—I was talking about Quebec and Labrador—are not taken into consideration by the government, know that I am all ears, as are others in the NDP. During our last meeting with that assembly, we talked about the integrity of resources and groundwater. These

topics were also discussed directly with Chief Picard. The other chiefs who belong to this assembly also shared their concerns. This problem is being studied right now, especially with respect to the effect of radon gas and its presence in groundwater.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Madam Speaker, in 2004, under the former Liberal government, we had the Kelowna accord, which had the agreement of different levels of government and aboriginal communities. If the current government had respected the Kelowna accord, the communities would be benefiting from it now. Would they not be in a better position than they are now? I would like to know what the member thinks about that.

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question. The accord he is referring to was not brought to my attention. Members will understand that I am new to the House.

There is certainly some complacency on the other side of the House since this situation has yet to be fixed, even though it is nothing new. The quality of water in isolated communities has been in the news for years, and I have yet to see any measures introduced to resolve this problem. The industry still has a strong presence in isolated regions and contributes nothing, with its drilling, to improving these communities and even less so to improving the quality of the water, basins and groundwater.

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would first like to congratulate my colleague from Manicouagan on his absolutely incredible presentation, which shed a lot of light on the whole issue. I would simply like to ask him if he can suggest any solutions to any of the issues he raised in his speech.

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain: Madam Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for her question. These issues are part of everyday life in Washat, whenever I go back. Since it is a 15-hour drive from Ottawa, I cannot return as often as I would like. Problems regarding water resources are still affecting communities near Sept-Îles because of uranium exploration. The same is true on the Lower North Shore. In my region, problems are often related to mining exploration. Personally, I think these issues need to be debated further over the next few years, since the situation is not really improving and I have not seen any proactive measures to fix the situation.

• (1135)

[English]

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to enter the debate on the opposition day motion on water in first nations communities.

Business of Supply

We have identified this as an issue whose time has come to be solved. This morning the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada spoke very clearly about the fact that there has been inadequate attention paid to this issue by all parties over the years. We can argue who has done good things and who has not done good things. His plea was that we put partisanship aside and we recognize together that there is no reason for not solving the problem. The problem is the inequity in terms of access to safe, clean drinking water and waste water treatment in first nations communities compared with non-aboriginal communities. I could not agree more.

This is an issue that all members of Parliament care about. It is a humanitarian issue. It is an equity issue. It is about safety. It is about saving lives. It just takes political will. This motion invites members of Parliament to agree that the time to solve this problem is now.

All levels of government share a responsibility for ensuring that all Canadians have reliable access to clean, safe drinking water.

[*Translation*]

We need to establish a strategy immediately in order to ensure that all aboriginal communities have access to drinking water. We need to take pertinent and decisive action to resolve this completely unacceptable situation.

[*English*]

There are fundamental water problems in Canada. Water is a very complex issue. The delivery of safe and clean drinking water is extremely complex. I learned that in my first year as minister of the environment in British Columbia. There were far too many boil water advisories in British Columbia. As the environment minister, I worked with the health minister to look at our approach to drinking water. A panel of experts headed by up by Mr. David Marshall, who was the chair of the Fraser Basin Council, assessed a proposed new drinking water act. It provided feedback to the government. That act was duly passed. There was also a safe drinking water action plan.

That action plan addressed the cumulative impacts on water. It gave communities the power to bring industry, the municipal government, non-governmental organizations and government departments together to develop a plan for addressing the cumulative impacts on water. The regulations gave the government some teeth for making sure that the challenges to obtaining safe and clean water were addressed. Having gone through that process, I am aware of the great complexities that plague us in having safe drinking water in communities across our geographically vast nation.

The regulatory and legislative gaps are still rife, despite the fact that many provinces and the federal government have made efforts to address that issue. Federal-provincial jurisdiction is always a challenge. The federal government wants to ensure it is not stepping into a provincial jurisdiction and provincial governments may be waiting for the federal government to take leadership.

Provinces and the federal government work together often in a constructive way. The leader of the Liberal Party pointed out that when he was premier, the government of Ontario worked with the Liberal government in Ottawa to address issues of inequitable access to safe water and infrastructure in aboriginal communities. The federal-provincial sharing of jurisdiction, of which water is a classic example, does not need to mean inaction or ineffectiveness. It simply

needs to be addressed in the development of the strategy. It means working with the provinces to solve this problem.

By the way, I would not consider that to be a great strength of the current Conservative government. Consultation with the provinces in matters such as its crime bill, Bill C-10, and other matters has been missing completely and consultation certainly is necessary in a water strategy such as the Liberals are proposing in this motion.

There is a deficit across Canada in all categories of infrastructure. Municipalities, small and large alike, have gone to the federal government to reinforce that it is the federal government that has the ability to tax. A large percentage of taxes that are levied are federal government taxes, but the majority of infrastructure is the responsibility of municipalities. There is a mismatch.

There is over \$1 billion in new funding needed immediately, and \$4.7 billion over the next 10 years to upgrade water and waste water infrastructure to existing standards, according to a national report regarding first nations reserves. It would take \$4.7 billion over 10 years to address this problem. Those are significant resources especially at a time when Canada is facing a slowdown in its economy, and we have not yet made up the half a million full-time net jobs that we have lost since before the recession.

• (1140)

Let us put this into perspective. What is the cost to the treasury as a result of the reduction in taxes for large and profitable corporations? Their tax rate will go down from 16.5% to 15.5%.

I was at a breakfast this morning with the eminent economist Jack Mintz from Alberta. When asked about corporate tax rates, he said that his view is that they are appropriate right now. They are far lower than those in the United States. He is not calling for additional tax reductions.

The Conservative government is planning a corporate tax reduction from 16.5% to 15.5%. That will cost the treasury well over the \$4.7 billion over 10 years that is needed for first nations waste water and drinking water infrastructure.

Rather than further reduce corporate taxes, the government could decide that it would be more important to ensure that first nations living in communities without running water have safe drinking water and waste disposal. Imagine that. Is the government able to rethink its ideological decisions and do what is right to provide justice and equality for our first nations people? I hope so.

What about the government's new approach to crime? It will mean harsher and longer sentences for young people. Criminologists and people working in our criminal justice system say that will be counterproductive.

Many aspects of Bill C-10 are widely criticized by criminologists and public safety professionals. Many Canadians are concerned about the increased criminalization of Canadians and the effect that would have on first nations. The reality is there is a disproportionate number of first nations people in our jails, and it will be even worse when Bill C-10 passes.

Business of Supply

We have been arguing that those funds should be put into supports to prevent young aboriginal people in our cities from ending up in prison, as opposed to bringing in longer prison sentences, more prison sentences, and inflexible sentencing.

There are nine former bills rolled into that one bill. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has estimated that the government's crime agenda will cost \$5 billion. Let us take that \$5 billion and use it to upgrade the water infrastructure in remote first nations communities, those communities where people are carrying their water in buckets. Let us solve that problem rather than throwing more aboriginal young people in jail. I would ask the Conservative members to think about that.

Does it make more sense to add more prisoners to our already overcrowded prisons? Because of overcrowding, 85% of prisoners cannot access the drug treatment programs or anger management programs they are required to do under the conditions of their corrections plan. The government added \$120 million over five years for security, for dog teams, ion scanners and security experts. Why? Because overcrowding leads to more criminal behaviour in prison. The government wants to further overcrowd the prisons and dump more money into prison security, and yet it is cutting the drug treatment program in prisons. This is only going to get worse and become more expensive.

We should use the funds that Canada will have to dedicate because of Bill C-10 and the overcrowded prisons to address the lack of access to running water in our first nations communities.

• (1145)

As of last year, 116 first nations reserve communities across Canada were under a drinking water advisory. On average, these drinking water advisories last a year. They cannot drink water for that period of time. What are they going to do? They are going to spend time boiling that water, using expensive diesel fuel or other fuel that in some cases has been flown into their communities, so they and their children do not get sick.

That is completely unacceptable. Too many of these communities have living conditions that are shocking to Canadians when travelling to other countries and seeing some of the communities without running water and waste disposal. We should be shocked into action, knowing that those communities are rampant in Canada.

There are a number of things that have led to this problem. The government's response so far has been to cut Environment Canada's environmental monitoring program. We need to add resources. The answer is not regulation without resources. These communities do not have resources.

I want to just touch on some of the myths about water in Canada. I recently hosted a policy breakfast in Vancouver Quadra with a very eminent, recognized professor at UBC, Dr. Karen Bakker. She is the author of a book about water called, *Eau Canada*, which has been very highly regarded and has won awards.

Dr. Bakker came to my policy breakfast to talk about five myths of Canada's water. One of them is that we have the most abundant fresh water anywhere. That is not true. There are countries that have more fresh water, and certainly on a volume of water per square hectare, we are not near the top of the pack.

The myth is that our fresh water is clean. In fact, we lag in terms of the cleanliness of our water. Unfortunately we know that some of our industrial developments are contaminating our water. With some of our farming practices, even in the Fraser Valley, in today's era of understanding the threats to groundwater of overusing fertilizer or mismanaging the disposal of sewage from livestock, we still see the contamination of our streams, creeks and aquifers. Canada's water is not as clean as Canadians would like to think.

We also think our waste water is being treated before it goes back into the environment, as it should be. According to Dr. Bakker, Canada has nothing to be proud of in terms of our waste water treatment standards.

There is a myth that our water is well-regulated and unfortunately that is also untrue. When I was the minister of environment in British Columbia, I discovered that British Columbia was called the wild west for groundwater because there was absolutely zero regulation of that water. Anyone could put a well of any size anywhere and extract water from the ground without any regulatory oversight or rules. One of the things I was able to do as a provincial minister was to introduce the first-ever groundwater regulations in British Columbia.

Last, according to Dr. Bakker, people's conception about threats to our water is the export of bulk water to the United States. That is one of the biggest threat. In fact, Dr. Bakker's view is that this is a low risk because the northern U.S. states would prevent it. Their water regulatory regimes are stronger than in Canada. The risk is that Canadians do not understand the depth and extent of the problems with our water supplies.

I want to get back to the situation of first nations bearing the brunt of the challenges of having clean running water and waste water treatment. There is a lack of drinking water and a lack of adequate sanitation and flush toilets.

• (1150)

First nations communities are 90% more likely to lack running water than other Canadian and non-first nation homes. Just think about that. That is simply unacceptable and we cannot allow it. Canada is a country that has a medium rate of income inequality, but it is growing faster than income inequality in the United States. This kind of neglect of first nations' basic health, safety and access to clean water contributes to income inequality. Families are spending their time, effort and resources to do something that I, in Vancouver Quadra, can do by turning on a tap or flushing the toilet. Those families are not spending that time completing high school, or getting post-secondary education or finding a way to have jobs and economic opportunities in their communities.

Business of Supply

We do see dramatic differentials in our human and social conditions in first nations communities. The levels of lower economic opportunities, such as health, education, longevity, infant and child mortality, numbers of community members in jail, et cetera, are unfortunately higher in first nations communities. First nations make up 2.7% of the adult population, yet 18.5% of the prison population and that is unacceptable. However, it does not come out of the blue. It ties into our inability or unwillingness as governments to put our shoulders to the wheel and work together to tackle this very basic determinant of the quality of life, which is to have safe running water and waste water treatment.

We need a real strategy, not just a list of problems and goals. We need to have the actions, the accountability for those actions and we need to take care of this problem and we need to start now.

• (1155)

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Madam Speaker, it is hard for me to believe we are talking about Canada and about children who are using a bucket as a washroom. We are talking about sewage going out into open ditches. We are talking about those who do not have clean drinking water. We are talking about Canada where the gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider. I see that in my own community.

I want to focus today on the aboriginal students and young people. I am absolutely amazed that there is even a need for this debate, that the government is not rushing out saying that it has not known this was happening and that it is going to go out and fix this right now. The government did that for banks. It fixed the problems of banks and oil companies by giving them huge tax breaks and money.

What are some concrete steps the government could take straight away to ensure that no child in Canada lives in these kinds of conditions?

Ms. Joyce Murray: Madam Speaker, the government could take the \$5 billion over 10 years that is required to get the job done and dedicate those funds to do that. It could work with first nations and the provinces to map out the action to do that.

I would add on the fact that first nations children are in this situation, the federal government is responsible for that in many cases. For example, the Tsay Keh Dene in North Interior British Columbia in the Rocky Mountain Trench are a people who used to have 7.5 million hectares that they occupied in their hunting and fishing lifestyle. When government came in to build a dam in that area, it flooded the rich bottom land and the community was moved by the then Department of Indian and Northern Affairs to a 13-hectare swamp land site on the side of Finlay Road, which was a logging road in the area at 72 miles. They were told that this was their new home. They were given stacks of three quarter inch plywood and 2x4s and told that they could build their houses. They had no infrastructure for sewage and water. They had plywood shacks with no insulation. That was the new community for the Tsay Keh Dene thanks to INAC. That is the kind of thing the federal government—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I must give an opportunity for other members to ask questions.

The hon. member for Wetaskiwin.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Madam Speaker, I listened intently to the member for Vancouver Quadra. She has made numerous references to the publication, *Eau Canada*, specifically to a piece authored by Dr. Bakker, who was clear that Canada needed to strengthen governance of water in Canada.

Does the member support legal standards for drinking water for first nations that other Canadians enjoy?

• (1200)

Ms. Joyce Murray: Madam Speaker, of course I support standards for drinking water, but that is only the beginning.

A federal government years ago moved first nations out of their traditional territory and put them into small reserves that were totally unsuitable. It disrupted the ecologies of the game and fish that were the basis of their livelihoods. The government has a far greater responsibility than to just say that there will be some standards.

To go back to the people of the Tsay Keh Dene, after a few years of trying to live in these uninsulated shacks with no services, having to drive down the road to get buckets of water out of the creek, they just moved out and went back into the forest to try to live in their historic way again. It was completely untenable to live in the reserve.

How many of our first nations are in that very same situation because the representatives of the people of Canada took those kinds of actions and dismissed and denied their rights?

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Madam Speaker, I listened very intently to the hon. member. However, this is not just an issue for aboriginal people in Canada, although it is a crisis in their communities, it is also a pan-Canadian issue and an environmental issue, which will not get the attention it needs if the government continues to cut Environment Canada, putting water inspection at risk.

We understand that the frontbench of the Conservative government did the same thing when it was the frontbench of the Harris government in the province of Ontario. It cut water inspection there and that led to the tragedy of Walkerton, which is known to this day. We will look very closely at whether the government will take the issue of water seriously.

Her party was in government for 12 years. Why did it not address this issue? How can the House really believe that the Liberal Party will be serious about this issue now when it certainly was not on its agenda when it was in government and could have actually done something about it.

Business of Supply

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, the Liberal leader very wisely called for this to be a debate about how to move forward on a critical issue. If the member wants to talk about the past, I could ask why the leader of his party was the one responsible for bringing down a Liberal government that had actually consulted with first nations and consulted with the provinces over the course of a year and a half and come up with the Kelowna accord to address this very issue? It was his leader and his party that undermined that accord and they should take responsibility for that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, everyone agrees that the issue of access to drinking water, social housing and the infrastructure to support all of that is a priority for Canada. However, several conditions created by the Liberals continue to undermine access to drinking water, as well as the health and dignity of first nations communities. For instance, the Liberals put a cap on federal spending for aboriginal communities, limiting it to a 2% annual increase. As we know, both inflation and aboriginal population growth are higher than 2%. The fact is, the 2% cap translates into declining investments.

Will my Liberal colleague and her party now support eliminating the cap that they themselves established when they were in power?

[*English*]

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, I know it is not reasonable to expect that the member would have read the Liberal Party platform but that was explicitly in the Liberal Party's platform.

Many things need to be done in Canada by governments but we need to focus here on the specifics of the drinking water and waste water infrastructure that is needed. That is what this motion asks the government to do and the other parties to support. I understand that there are many associated issues.

One of the NDP members talked about environmental issues. I have a whole set of thoughts about how we contributed to the drinking water problems by doing resource developments without proper consultation and planning, and we continue to do that. For example, we are seeing a northern gateway pipeline proposal where first nations are saying that they were not consulted on it. Consultation is important. Preventing water related problems from resource development is critical. Replenishing our forests where they are being devastated by global warming related infestations, like pine beetle, is critical for hydrology.

There are many things we can do on the environmental level and on the social level, as the member just pointed out, with education, but we need to put the money for this infrastructure on the table, consult, get some action, get some timelines and get this done.

• (1205)

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have no hesitation in adding my voice in support of my hon. colleague's motion to improve water facilities in first nations communities. I thank him for demonstrating his party's willingness to work with all parliamentarians to advance an issue that has been a priority for members of this side of the House since first forming government in 2006.

I can assure the opposition that the Conservative government shares this commitment to ensuring that all first nations residents will have access to safe, clean and reliable drinking water. We recognize that access to safe water, the efficient treatment of waste water and the production of sources of drinking water on first nations land is critical to ensure the health and safety of first nations people.

This has been repeatedly demonstrated through our repeated investments and in partnership with first nations communities all across this country. Our government has made access to safe drinking water and effective waste water treatment on reserves a national priority.

Between 2006 and 2013, our government will have invested approximately \$2.5 billion in water and waste water infrastructure in first nations communities. These funds have been put to work under Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada's capital facilities and maintenance program, as well as the first nations water and waste water action plan and Canada's economic action plan.

These investments have steadily increased the effectiveness of water services for first nations people and, of course, for first nations communities. In making these investments to address water challenges on reserves, our government has also made it a priority to work in partnership with first nations people to ensure they fully benefit from these investments and their voice is heard.

I will use the example of the Moose Deer Point First Nation in Ontario. Our government invested \$18 million toward the community's new water treatment plant. That water treatment system featured an intake and a wet well that also includes a slow sand-filtered treatment. This system enabled water production that meets the guidelines of Canadian drinking water quality.

Thanks to investments by the Moose Deer Point First Nation, the Government of Ontario and our government, local residents now have a new recreation and health centre. By investing in the health and wellness of first nations communities, we are also helping to stimulate the local economy and open up opportunities for community members to enjoy fitness activities close to their own homes.

Our government has invested in 17 capital infrastructure projects throughout the Atlantic region to achieve both social and economic progress. While these funds are primarily targeted at water and waste water infrastructure, they are also helping to fund road construction and road maintenance, plus emergency management, such as the purchase of new fire trucks, which also depend on a reliable supply of water.

All of these investments in community infrastructure for first nations are helping to stimulate economic growth, foster sustainable first nations communities and support stronger, safer and healthier communities.

Business of Supply

The Sheshatshiu Innu First Nation in Newfoundland and Labrador is receiving over \$7 million to facilitate upgrades to its waste water collection and for the design and construction of new mechanical sewage treatment plants. This investment has enabled the community to improve its waste water disposal, while creating over 1,600 hours of employment.

On the opposite side of the country, the White River First Nation in Yukon Territory is benefiting from design changes in two treatment plant systems to help temper water correctly, as well as new on-line chlorine analyzers. These improvements are empowering first nations groups to provide clean, safe water to all people in their communities.

The Iskut First Nation in British Columbia has taken advantage of our government's \$1.4 million investment to enhance the drinking water system in that community by constructing ultraviolet and chlorine disinfection systems as well.

● (1210)

Then there is the example of the Dene Tha' First Nation in Alberta, which opened its Chateh Water Treatment Plant earlier this year. The new plant is equipped with membrane filtration, the latest in water filtration technology. This new technology goes beyond the conventional plant filtration and delivers quality that surpasses the requirement of current standards.

Construction was completed on a new raw water reservoir and the water intake pipe was also replaced on this reserve. Repairs were also completed on the existing water plant, the fire pump and water main to optimize the existing plants.

The Government of Canada contributed \$11.8 million to this initiative from the \$1.4 billion investment for aboriginal peoples under Canada's economic action plan. However, it was the work and the planning at the community level that really made this project happen. The community leaders and residents of the Dene Tha' recognized that in addition to ensuring safe, clean drinking water, infrastructure projects like this bring forth other benefits. They provide opportunities for skills development and meaningful jobs. They help to spur economic growth, laying the foundation for long-term prosperity.

The Black Lake and Fond du Lac communities of the Denesuline First Nation in Saskatchewan also reaped the benefits of our government's \$18 million investment in two new sewage systems.

Likewise, the Piapot Cree First Nation has benefited from partnerships with the federal government. Our \$4.2 million investment in the community has resulted in the expansion of its water treatment plant, including the building of a new well, increased building and reservoir size, and the development of new treatment equipment that carries out reverse osmosis.

In Manitoba, the water and sewer project at Fisher River First Nation has been completed, generating positive results for local residents. It consists of a new water treatment plant, a new lagoon, water distribution and sewage collection piping, as well as multiple trucks. Again, the benefits extend beyond immediate improvements to public health to include economic development opportunities for the people of the Fisher River First Nation.

Another inspiring example of the power of partnerships is the water treatment plant at Kahnawake in Quebec. The community's water treatment plant is truly an outstanding facility that meets the needs of this community's growing population.

I could cite further examples all across the country. The stories I have outlined underscore the power of partnerships and what we can achieve when we work together toward common goals. Partnerships also acknowledge that responsibility for providing water and waste water services to first nations is shared among band councils and the federal government.

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada provides funding and advice regarding the design, construction, operation and maintenance of water and waste water facilities. It also sets standards through protocols and provides funding for training staff, such as water treatment plant operators. However, the hands-on, day-to-day business of water and waste water management rests with the communities. That is why we must work together.

Our long-term goal is to do more than just improve water quality. We also want to increase the capacity of first nations communities to manage and operate water and waste water services, plus, develop skills to design and construct facilities in accordance with established standards.

Through initiatives such as the circuit rider training program, which other speakers have highlighted, the number of first nations operators who are certified or in training toward certification has steadily increased.

The extension of the first nation water and waste water action plan continues to support water and waste water treatment facility construction and renovation, as well as the operation and maintenance of these facilities, the training of operators, and related public service activities on reserve.

In budget 2010, the Conservative government recognized the need to continue to support first nations communities in the provision of safe water treatment. We allocated an additional \$330 million to extend the first nation water and waste water action plan for two more years.

That funding is in addition to the annual departmental allocation of approximately \$200 million and the \$187.7 million over 2009-11 under Canada's economic action plan.

● (1215)

Of course, there are challenges that remain. These challenges will require the concerted and co-operative effort of all parliamentarians. This was reinforced by the national assessment of water and waste water systems in first nation communities. As the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development acknowledged at the time of its release, more needs to be done, especially in capacity building and monitoring.

Business of Supply

I would point out that this is the first time that a national assessment of this scope has ever been commissioned by a federal government. It is a reflection of our commitment to transparency and accountability. The national assessment is an unprecedented reference tool that will support our work going forward. We have developed a response plan to address the findings and recommendations of that report.

The response plan is built on current programs and initiatives to improve on-reserve drinking water. We will implement this plan in partnership with the first nations communities. Our government will continue to work with first nations by investing in infrastructure, monitoring and capacity. Work is currently under way to address 15 high risk water systems this year. On infrastructure alone, our government plans to invest in an additional 57 water systems by fiscal year 2015, a very ambitious but doable project. In addition, we will continue to invest in capacity building, which the report highlighted is a major challenge in maintaining effective water and waste water systems.

We also recognize that legislation is required to ensure that first nations have the same protection regarding safe water as other Canadians already have. With the introduction of Bill S-11, we were already well on our way to achieving that goal prior to the last election. As a result of the dissolution of Parliament on March 26, 2011, the proposed safe drinking water for first nations act died at committee on second reading in the Senate. That was certainly not our wish.

I can assure members that this was only a temporary setback. The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development and his officials have been engaged in a dialogue on safe drinking water with first nations. With the benefit of that input, the minister will reintroduce legislation to ensure that first nations have access to safe, clean and reliable drinking water. The opposition has no reason to doubt that the Conservative government will continue to make safe drinking water and effective waste water treatment on reserves a national priority, from coast to coast to coast.

I urge all members of Parliament to work with the Government of Canada to accelerate the progress we have already made on this very important file.

● (1220)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we have seen where their priorities lie. Perhaps there was one bill that did not pass because of the election, but the government began by focusing on omnibus bills, such as the one on crime, for example, instead of presenting concrete measures to fix aboriginal issues.

I have a specific question. This morning, I heard that the government supported the Liberal motion. Will the government still support it, even with the amendment? And will the government commit to taking tangible action and putting its heart and soul into fixing the problem, and not just for the photo ops or for scoring political points at the expense of aboriginal peoples?

[*English*]

Mr. Ray Boughen: Mr. Speaker, is only fair to say that there are many responsibilities, many requests, many issues to deal with in government. Certainly, ensuring there is safe water for aboriginal folks is a top priority of this government.

We would be wrong to suggest that no other issues are before Parliament; there are many issues. Today we are looking at the safe water issue, and we are working very hard to ensure that safe water is a way of life on all reserves from coast to coast to coast.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if there is one thing to take from the intent of today's motion and debate, it is where we go from here. One not uncommon question in infrastructure investment once something is built is how it continues to provide for the community going forward in terms of operations and maintenance. If we look at Kashechewan, the infrastructure existed. While we can debate whether it was the right plant in the right place, one thing that the report said was truly lacking was training for the operators of that plant.

Does my colleague think that even before any government makes a commitment to bricks and mortar and to working toward the development of infrastructure, there has to be a training component and human resource development so that these issues and problems can be addressed with local answers and initiatives?

Mr. Ray Boughen: Mr. Speaker, we have looked at that issue very carefully. In presenting the bill to the House, we wanted to make sure we covered as many options and bases as possible. In the discussion here, we are suggesting that the work on clean water will provide many opportunities for skill developments. We are looking at having first nations people manning their own operations, being trained how to handle water and waste water to make it safe. The development will result in many meaningful jobs and help to spur the economy, because it will offer employment to people who may not be employed at the time the training happens. There will be economic growth helping to lay a foundation for long-term prosperity of the many first nations people who will be working on water treatment.

Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I understand that the Assemblée des Premières nations du Québec et du Labrador passed a resolution to explore regulatory development and that it in fact reconfirmed the resolution in September of this year. The Atlantic Policy Congress passed a similar resolution.

Could the member for Palliser enlighten the House as to whether other first nations have been consulted in the development of this legislation in the way those two bodies have?

● (1225)

Mr. Ray Boughen: Mr. Speaker, in answer to the question, I will share this with the House. Since 2006, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada and Health Canada have engaged with first nations and first nations organizations at the provincial and territorial level to develop a framework that will allow all first nations people access to water treatment systems and to make sure that the project moves forward.

Business of Supply

When the bill was crafted, this issue was taken into consideration and it has been addressed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the hon. member opposite for this marvellous display of actions, measures and programs to help aboriginals and first nations. However, the 2011 Auditor General's report states that there are still many gaps and that they are related to communication and the transfer of power, authority and freedom that would allow first nations to take action in their own communities. In the end, despite all the steps that have been taken in the past, we have not seen any progress in term of children's health and the safety of waste water management infrastructure.

How can we believe that the government will really take action to make drinking water accessible to families, women and children so that first nations can operate freely in terms of federal programs?

[*English*]

Mr. Ray Boughen: Mr. Speaker, as we said earlier in the presentation to the House, government cannot solve all ills of society in one move and, certainly, we acknowledge that much has to be done in this Parliament to help the first nations and that we have to work together to ensure safe drinking water and the disposal of waste water.

What happened prior to the introduction of this bill is water under the bridge, if members will pardon the pun. We certainly cannot go back and fix that. What we will do is move forward and deal with the issues that are current today and tomorrow.

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in addition to thanking my colleague for all of the information he has provided, I would like to ask how the government is working with partners to improve water quality across first nations.

Mr. Ray Boughen: Mr. Speaker, the government is well aware that the only course of action that really works well is partnerships. When we have strong partnerships, things happen.

We are looking at increased access by first nations to water systems, and first nations folks are talking about the work that will eventually move to 375 operators, all of whom will be trained people.

That is part of the answer to ensuring there are partnerships and like-thinking and designs that will carry things forward. Indeed, waste water projects will affect 36,000 people in a positive manner.

That will all be part and parcel of the bill when it is tabled here in the House.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, being a member of Parliament from Manitoba and having had the experience of being in the Manitoba Legislature for a number of years, there are few issues that really touch a person as much as the fundamentals of being able to live.

There is a certain expectation, I believe, that Canadians have as a whole in terms of normal living standards. Year after year would go by and we continue to have this outstanding issue on the quality of water for thousands of Manitobans.

I believe, at the end of the day, that there is no political party in this Chamber that can escape the issue of blame for not doing enough. All political parties have to take some responsibility. When we talk about the children in northern Manitoba and the importance in terms of getting them that healthy commodity of water, we have had administrations of all political stripes attempt a solution. Ultimately, in some ways, there has been some success, but it has been very limited success.

There has been a great deal of frustration because there is a sense that governments are not doing enough to provide what is an absolutely essential service, which is to have access to water. Imagine people living in a northern rural community where they have to exit their homes and go to a lake or a river with a pail to scoop up some water to be brought home, so that they can get rid of waste or have it to boil Kraft dinner, for use in doing dishes, or having that drink, or having it available to mix with kool-aid packages, or whatever it might be.

A vast majority of Canadians have very little understanding and, I would argue, very little appreciation of the degree to which individuals who do not have that simple access to whatever have to go through. In other words we can sympathize. There is no doubt that we can sympathize with what is happening. However, can we really empathize with what is happening in these rural communities, not only in Manitoba but throughout our country?

My focus, of course, for now is on the province of Manitoba. About a year ago, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, which is one of Manitoba's most read papers, did a fairly decent story on the issue. I believe it was on the reserve at Red Sucker Lake and that area. It drew a lot of attention to the issue.

The reason why I raise that is because I believe we all have somewhat of a role and responsibility to educate. Through that education, I believe the more people who are aware of the situation, the greater the need will be to try to get this issue resolved.

I have had the opportunity in many different forums to enter into discussions about the quality of life in rural Manitoba, particularly up north, and with issues dealing with food. I introduced a private member's bill back in the Manitoba Legislature suggesting that we need to have one price for milk because of how important milk is to the children up north. There was a feeling that we needed to make it affordable because quite often pop could be bought for less than milk. There is a very low consumption of milk products, nowhere near the degree to which people in northern communities could or should be drinking milk. Price does matter.

● (1230)

We need to get into these types of discussions with our constituents because most people believe that every home in Canada has access to running water. If they want water, they just go to the tap, turn it on and drink it.

Most people would be quite surprised to find out that there are 100-plus communities in this country that do not have the ability to turn on the water at the kitchen sink and use it at their discretion. That is why I appreciate media outlets like the *Winnipeg Free Press* highlighting the seriousness of the issue.

Business of Supply

This begs the question: What should be happening? It is not like this is a new issue. This issue has been around for years. As I indicated at the beginning of my comments, all political parties have dropped the ball to a certain degree.

With the motion today, we are trying to raise the ante. We are saying that the Government of Canada needs to recognize that it is now time for the government to act, even though many would argue that the government should have acted yesterday. This opposition day provides a wonderful forum for the government to clearly state on the record that it will put in some timelines, that it will make a commitment as to how it will approach this issue.

The leader of the Liberal Party referenced his visit to a rural community in Ontario where he saw first-hand the impact of no water coming out of a tap. Being so touched by that, he went back to the Ontario Legislature in Toronto and said something had to be done. He took the initiative to work with the federal government in order to make a difference for the communities he represented as premier of the province of Ontario.

I, if not all members in this chamber, would recognize this action as someone recognizing just how serious the issue was. The Constitution and treaty agreements clearly illustrate that it is not an issue involving provincial jurisdiction, yet he felt something had to be done. In working with the federal government, he was able to at least address a part of the issue.

I understand that the member for Toronto Centre did get a chance to meet with Premier Selinger, who has been the Premier of Manitoba for a couple of years. He is very familiar with the northern caucus, which is made up of all New Democratic MLAs.

Manitoba has put this issue on the table. From what we understand, the Government of Manitoba recognizes the problem and it wants to ensure that rural communities, reserves and others do have clean running water as all Canadians expect.

The province of Manitoba is prepared to work with Ottawa. We know the leadership within aboriginal communities is strong. There is no shortage of individuals within our first nations who do not feel passionate about this issue because, in good part, they live it. They are constantly dealing with this particular issue. I would suggest that they are the major stakeholders in this. Some consultation is needed to work in co-operation with our aboriginal leaders. We have to broaden it out a bit more to look at the stakeholders.

●(1235)

The time has come for the federal government, through this motion, to play a stronger role. We have argued this for the last number of years as a political entity in the House. At the end of the day, we need the federal government to recognize the leadership role that it has to play in resolving this issue because, in good part, resources matter. If the resources are not there in order to allow this clean flowing water into our rural communities, it will not happen.

If the Government of Canada decides not to play that leadership role, there is a good chance the conditions in many of these communities will not improve. That is why we would ultimately look to the government in Manitoba's case. I have not canvassed all of the provinces that would be impacted. I suspect most provinces would have concerns within their own areas. I am sure all provinces

share the same concern with respect to the availability of clean drinking water. However, from Manitoba's perspective, the major stakeholders are at the table. At the very least, they now want to see leadership coming from the House.

This opposition day does allow the opportunity for us as legislators to raise what we believe are important issues for our nation. Our first opposition day dealt with suicide. As a whole, people were quite relieved to see the discussion that had taken place. I would suggest this is one of those issues that a great majority of Canadians would see as the right thing to be talking about today.

However, to talk about it is one thing; to act on it is another. It is the government of the day that ultimately has to take action as we in the opposition will hold it to account. If in fact the government takes action by coming to the table and demonstrating leadership that will make a difference, I will be one of the first to applaud.

Again, in my province I know that it is doable. It is doable because the will is there in the minds of all the stakeholders. The only one we need to gauge to see where it is at is the federal government. Hopefully, in the next number of weeks we will have a better indication in terms of its commitment to provide the resources and leadership necessary in order to make a difference.

It is multi-faceted in the sense that it is not just about building a water treatment facility. I realize that hundreds of millions of dollars is required in order to resolve the problem because it is not just treatment facilities we are talking about. In many ways it has to do with holding tanks or the infrastructure in some of the homes themselves. There is a serious infrastructure deficit in the delivery of water.

●(1240)

If we want to resolve this issue, the only way to do it is for the federal government must come to the table. There are times we could ultimately argue that government needs to cut back on expenditures, but for this issue, there is no excuse for us not to take some form of action.

The attorney general back in 2005 made a series of recommendations for first nations drinking water. That was not the only time, but it was a significant time in the sense that a detailed report came out with a series of recommendations on types of things we needed to do. It was a good indication that we had dropped the ball, or we were not addressing the issue up to that point and we needed to take some action. However, since that period, not much has taken place.

As of 2010, 116 first nations reserves and communities across Canada were under drinking water advisories, with a mean average duration of almost a year, or 343 days. That is thousands of people and a lot of communities. The lack of clean drinking water presents serious health threats. We hear a great deal about that.

I have had the opportunity to meet with individuals from first nations. I get the opportunity more than one might think because quite often a number of people from the reserves will come to live in the beautiful riding of Winnipeg North for a part of the year. This is when I am quite often told about the conditions they have to endure. That is one of the reasons why I feel it is really an important issue for us to deal with.

Business of Supply

As this point tries to emphasize, it is very much a health issue. Clean water is something which I believe will ensure we have healthier communities. There are many issues facing our reserves and we would like to see the government take this issue and demonstrate its commitment to try to improve the infrastructure of our reserves, to improve the quality of life on our reserves. This is one of those issues which the government can demonstrate very clearly a sense of commitment to make a difference.

About six weeks ago someone approach me about the apology. He commented that it was nice, but he wanted to see something that was more tangible for now. It was not to belittle what the government had done. There was great recognition for the apology for the residential schools, and it was very well received, but for him, it had gone past that. He said that we needed to look at other conditions. I cannot recall, but I would be surprised if we did not talk about water at that time. Fresh food and products is always a very major issue, but water leads it.

• (1245)

Mr. John Carmichael (Don Valley West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague opposite for his thoughtful remarks. It is clear that we would all agree this is something many of us take for granted, but it is a very important issue that we expect should be addressed. To that end, the *Winnipeg Free Press* published a series of articles in 2010 and 2011, highlighting the lack of running water in the Island Lake first nations.

Could the hon. member give us his thoughts with regard to the assertions made in that series of articles?

• (1250)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I have actually been provided one of the articles. It is a fairly lengthy, detailed article that Mia Rabson from the *Winnipeg Free Press* has written. It states from the beginning:

The chief of a northern Manitoba First Nation says his reserve is nearing a water crisis after more than half of the band's residents were cut off from a primitive water system.

On Monday, Red Sucker Lake Chief Larry Knott ordered residents to stop using water from the holding tanks beneath their homes after four tanks were randomly tested and all contained bacteria. More than 100 houses in Red Sucker Lake use the tanks...

It goes on. It is a very good story and that is why I make reference to it. It is always encouraging when we get media outlets that pick up on those social policies that need to be brought to the public's attention. I enjoyed reading the story but, more important, I hope many people had the opportunity, like my colleague from across the way, to recognize it.

Now it is up to us to do what we can and, from my capacity, to provide accountability and try to encourage and promote, however I can, the government to come into Manitoba and to demonstrate the leadership that is needed to make the difference with providing water.

[Translation]

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased that we can talk about this major issue for the aboriginal communities—although it is unfortunate that it is still an issue in 2011. I represent the NDP on the Standing Committee on Health where I am responsible for aboriginal health issues. Every

time I ask our witnesses in committee to tell us what the federal government can do to improve health for the aboriginal peoples, who have a number of health problems—often more than the general public—they often tell me the same thing: improve their basic sanitary conditions. This includes better housing to ensure that the problem of overcrowding does not affect public health, and it is also includes improving the drinking water supply.

I am quite pleased that the Liberals have proposed this discussion today. I simply want to agree with the hon. Liberal member that, in 2011, it is high time for the Conservative government to address the drinking water problem in aboriginal communities to ensure that the aboriginal peoples can finally enjoy decent living conditions and flourish like all other Canadians.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I would agree. There is the expectation that people living on reserves are entitled to have living conditions that are far more acceptable than what they have today. There is no doubt that, between our first nations and our federal government, we are never going to achieve that unless there is a better sense of co-operation. In that co-operation, the government needs to come to the table with the necessary resources.

Quite often, that also means working with other stakeholders like our provinces. They too have a vested interested. When we talk about poor quality water and we get children who are sick as a result of it, they then go into our health care facilities more often than they would normally have to, or require health care services. Those are provincially administered. There needs to be more co-operation.

First nations people have been very good at hammering it out how important this issue is and they are bringing it to the government. They are saying that they need the help and the government needs to respond. We need a government today to say that it understands the problem, that it is prepared to deal with the problem, that it will work with the Premier of Manitoba and the first nations of Manitoba and that it will resolve it in Manitoba. Then the government needs to apply the principle to wherever else might be needed.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the work my colleague has done on this file and in the past in the provincial chamber in Manitoba.

In first nation communities probably one of the most alarming health outcomes is the increase in obesity and diabetes. The member commented about access to dairy products such as milk and just how prohibitive the costs were to buy those products in northern communities.

With illnesses caused by bad water and access to drinking water, does the member think that would also have a significant impact on the occurrence of diabetes and obesity, two alarming health outcomes we have seen in first nation communities over the years?

Business of Supply

•(1255)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, absolutely. Over the years that I served as an MLA, I heard some horror stories. I like to use milk as an example because I introduced a bill on numerous occasions, which unfortunately did not pass. However, the health issue is such a big concern on our reserves. Providing clean flowing, drinkable water would make a huge impact in the health conditions in those communities.

I believe there are very few members in this chamber who have an excellent appreciation as to the actual health conditions of the children who live on reserves today. When we talk about FASD, diabetes or obesity, they are serious issues. That is why I believe the Government of Canada needs to be more sensitive to what the leadership of our first nations people are saying and to create the dialogue that is necessary in order to start to resolve some of these issues.

There is no reason why first nations cannot have clean flowing water. There is no reason why the parents of those children should not be able to afford to buy milk more so than pop. It is endless in terms of the examples. It is all about stakeholders getting together and acting on some of the concerns the chiefs and others have sent to Ottawa, to the local legislatures and others.

Mr. Greg Rickford (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am absolutely delighted to stand in this place to speak to this issue.

Perhaps somewhat uniquely, it may be useful not just for the member from the opposition who tabled the motion, but for the one who just spoke to know that I spent eight years of my life living and working in isolated and remote first nations communities as a nurse before being elected to this place. Furthermore, I worked consultatively and in a legal capacity to deal in no small part with a number of issues not just around health, but particularly as they might relate to safe potable drinking water and responsible waste water treatment.

I am glad that the member who tabled the motion has had somewhat of an epiphany. While he was the premier of the province of Ontario and while the Liberal Party was governing Canada at that time, I was actually a nurse working up in those communities. I can assure him that it would have been great if they not only could have acted on a number of these structural challenges that are related to safe, potable drinking water then, but also developed a responsible and strategic policy platform. Had that occurred, I have no doubt we would not be in this situation.

To frame this debate as an intellectual and a practical matter, it is important to understand what has gone on here today from this side of the House, and that is a willingness to be open, frank and transparent about the reality of this debate, where our action is and where it is headed. There are three key areas: capacity, legislation and infrastructure.

I am pleased to report to the House that unlike any other exercise taken certainly in modern political times, in 2006 we started out with a coast to coast to coast consultation with technical experts around

the issue of first nations and providing safe potable drinking water and waste water treatment for those communities. We spoke at length with community members. We talked to departmental policy people. That consultation was uniquely and importantly in co-operation with the Assembly of First Nations.

Flowing from that process, a couple of key things happened. I want to speak very briefly to those. First, the minister, as he pointed out today, directed a report to be done. That information was consolidated in a comprehensive way so that we understood what pillars ought to form in an effort to overcome the structural challenges in more than 600 first nations communities. Many of them are isolated and remote. Many of them pose specific technical problems for the development of safe drinking water and waste water treatment, challenges that are not so common to communities in the southern part of the country.

We embrace the findings of the report. We are happy to report that we were acting on those issues long before the report came out. Moving forward, we need to understand the importance of developing capacity, and the ability of the communities to do responsible reporting, monitoring and maintenance of some of these highly sophisticated pieces of critical infrastructure.

I am pleased to report that in the great Kenora riding, our investments have included working with Northern Waterworks and forming partnerships with Confederation College in an effort to ensure that members of these first nations communities can come to a centre in Red Lake, in Dryden and/or in Kenora to get the technical certifications they require to operate these pieces of infrastructure and to do the reporting and the maintenance. In more than a few cases, these first nations folks have gone back to their communities and have been making serious inroads on the reporting, maintenance and operation of these facilities. Ironically, their degree of certification has put them in demand in communities across the great Kenora riding and in fact across the country.

•(1300)

In some instances, the minister and I had an opportunity to travel to parts of Quebec where we saw first-hand first nations communities and municipalities sharing not just the infrastructure itself but the technical capacity which is so essential to provide safe drinking water and waste water treatment.

Earlier this morning we heard the minister speak passionately and eloquently about the legislation that needs to be in place. We have identified from our coast to coast to coast consultations the need to have an enforceable piece of legislation that is more than just a frame of reference for the first nations and aboriginal communities. Also, the government needs to create standards that deal with some of the challenges that the jurisdictions have posed.

Business of Supply

For example, our government took a responsible approach to this as we did our analysis of high risk communities. We found that from one province to another there were some parts of the legislation which were not the same. The federal government made a responsible decision at that time in terms of assessing the risk category for those first nations communities. We found that we ought to identify how to fill that vacuum and ensure that first nations communities across the country had a nationalized standard. This would fill a legal vacuum which was identified as a long-standing problem. As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, these problems are not a phenomenon of the last four years; they go back several decades.

I appreciated hearing from the member who tabled this motion earlier today. This issue is so serious that we ought not to be in an exercise of one-upmanship. We have done so much lately, particularly in the last four years, thoughtfully and comprehensively to embrace the findings, for example, of the Neegan Burnside report to address these issues.

Finally, there is no dispute that we need to continue to build on the infrastructure challenges that first nations communities across the region face. I am pleased to report that even before the coast to coast consultation began, we were dealing with some of the findings of a previous government dating back to 2001. We moved very quickly to address some of the critical infrastructure. I have been involved in my region and across northern Ontario. I have attended the grand openings of a number of water treatment facilities and waste water treatment plants.

This is an ongoing cyclical process. At times it is highly technical depending on the kinds of surfaces that may exist in a first nation community. For example, in the Island Lake region and on the tundra, similar to the great Kenora riding, there is a serious challenge in terms of laying pipes in and around or underneath the rock.

I speak from considerable experience. I was the nurse in charge of St. Theresa Point, one of the four communities in the Island Lake region, for some time. I saw first-hand back in the late 1990s and early 2000s that these challenges were there. I had a chance to work through some of the health problems those communities faced as a result of this ongoing challenge. These are things we have to keep in mind.

This will help us organize the discussion around those three things that we have done.

We remained committed from the outset to a five point plan of action for drinking water in first nations communities. Moving forward, it is our intention in the immediate year to address the solid evidence flowing from these reports that tell us which communities need critical infrastructure. We are going to act on that.

In addition, there is a plan for the completion of more than 57 water systems over the next four years.

• (1305)

There are plans to invest in almost 25% of the water systems that the national assessment identified, which I referred to earlier as high overall risk.

By any measure this is an ambitious goal. It is an important investment. I am delighted to hear that the Liberal Party is finally on board with us in terms of these measures. It is important to say that some progress had been made back in the day, and that those governments moved to understand on a community to community basis what challenges were being posed at the time.

What is great about what we have been doing for the last four or five years is that instead of just labelling something as being nationalized, we actually have a national strategy that brings together all of the essential components of the road map moving forward. I spoke about the three pillars, but again by way of review, it is important to understand that technical experts and community members were involved in this. At the time I was legal counsel in the Kenora riding working with community members to help them describe in layperson terms some of the challenges and technical terms. Some of them just wanted to bounce ideas off me, and I was more than pleased to work with them in that regard.

Importantly, perhaps for the first time in a long time, if ever, on a key file like this, we worked in full partnership with the AFN to identify the determinants of a successful road map to deal with ensuring that the ultimate goal would be the kind of safe potable drinking water and appropriate waste water treatment which, I think it is fairly safe to say, a number of Canadians in other communities would not so much take for granted—that would be unfair to say because we have seen situations where these systems have broken down—but certainly would assume would be there for them.

Moving forward, I am more than pleased to say that our additional investments flowing from Canada's economic action plan have supported more than 20 accelerated waste and waste water infrastructure projects and have been essential to the communities they serve. We need to continue to build on that.

It goes without saying with respect to the pith and substance of this motion that this side of the House is in a great position not just in political terms but in terms of the deeply personal and long-standing professional experience to which I have alluded. We must continue to move forward on the trajectory that this appears to be on, which is to work with first nations communities and leadership in combination with other stakeholders which we know to be important, such as the colleges and institutions that provide the certification.

I have worked closely with the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, and I know the minister fully understands the importance of training. These are examples of other kinds of investments, and I saw the nods of approval as the minister was speaking this morning, that are absolutely essential components to the development of a successful road map in terms of process and in terms of actual outcomes. They are essential in providing safe potable drinking water and appropriate waste water treatment, and addressing a number of health issues that have arisen in aboriginal communities across the country in the absence, from time to time, of the capacity of the infrastructure to deliver safe drinking water and appropriate waste water treatment.

Business of Supply

●(1310)

We want to continue to work with first nations to help achieve long-term sustainability. That is the objective. This is a file that is ongoing. Obviously, in many instances we are talking about isolated and remote communities where there are specific and unique challenges. There is a need for proper planning. For example, in the great Kenora riding, 25 of the 42 first nations communities are isolated and inaccessible by road. The delivery of equipment and materials that are going to build these communities needs to be planned.

In many instances, we are talking about the development of lagoons. Obviously the weather needs to co-operate and I will refer that matter to the Minister of the Environment. I can report, though, that the Kenora riding had a beautiful, long summer that allowed the construction of a lot of important projects, not just for safe drinking water and waste water treatment but building schools, small business centres and police stations in isolated first nations communities.

We are going to continue to work with first nations leadership. We are going to continue to listen to community members, technical experts, stakeholders such as colleges and important people like our friends at Northern Waterworks. I meet with them regularly to ensure that folks in communities have the skill sets not only to operate what is currently in place, but also to ensure that as the infrastructure is modernized they have the technical certifications to operate the new equipment.

Our investments must always be made on the basis of common sense and partnership. Solutions must be developed carefully to ensure that they meet the long-term goals of a community. In some instances, where first nations communities are adjoined or near cities, we must understand the importance of partnerships and shared resources. That means engaging a broader set of stakeholders in some instances.

The minister and I have seen real examples of how this can be successful, especially in light of our trip to Quebec. The scope of this assessment conducted by the federal government included physical inspections of 1,300 water and waste water systems, more than 800 wells and 1,900 septic fields. Inspectors visited nearly 600 communities in nine regions across the country. If colleagues are looking for a threshold test, I would submit that it is met. The national assessment is a vital part of the process to improve water and waste water systems. It is an effort to provide the most accurate account possible of the current state of these systems and their requirements moving forward.

It will help and has helped first nations communities. This government focuses its efforts on priority areas. It points to solutions and helps to ensure the maximum use of taxpayer dollars. It addresses this long-standing issue in a number of first nations communities across the country to bring safe drinking water and responsible waste water treatment to first nations communities.

I am pleased to report that on so many fronts, we are getting the job done. I appreciate the minister's robust efforts and our government's direction to get on this issue early, in partnership with first nations communities, and move forward.

●(1315)

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, generally, members who question a speaker say they listened very carefully to the hon. member's speech. The truth of the matter is I did not. I kind of tuned out after about 15 bromides and platitudes.

This is a call to action for the government. I think I lost count of how many times I heard that the government is going to work with the stakeholders, is going forward with all the plans that it is making, that it is talking to the stakeholders, working in various partnerships, et cetera. I offer insincere apologies to the hon. member for not really listening to his speech, because it is much like the minister who, when written to by my colleague from St. Paul's, indicated, "Regarding the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Government of Canada believes that the aspirational document sets out a number of principles that should guide harmonious and co-operative relationships between indigenous peoples and the states."

I think my question is relatively simple for the hon. member. When are we going to move off aspirational documents, when are we going to move off aspirational goals, when are we going to move off aspirational conversations with various stakeholders and, as the resolution says, get going by the spring of 2012?

●(1320)

Mr. Greg Rickford: Mr. Speaker, I almost need an aspirin after that question, but what is important is I have tremendous respect for the member. I always have had respect for him, but we have agreed to disagree on some issues.

It is unfortunate that he thinks that bromides and platitudes are flowing from a person who has spent the greater part of his professional life living and working in these isolated communities. He can disagree, but to say that the speech that I just gave, or some of the actions are bromides and platitudes, to say that the AFN, which was very adamant about a process that included it in this assessment, is a bromide and a platitude is disrespectful.

I am going to rise above the fray and say there is nothing about this that is a platitude when we look at the money that we have put into waste water treatment plants and water treatment plants across this country since 2006.

I was in those communities a long time before I came into this place and I take this issue very seriously. Major investments have been made. A strategic plan that is already delivering results was prescient to many of the points that these assessments and the reports identified.

I do not think it is a bromide or a platitude when a number of first nations communities in my riding have real technical certificates to operate the sophisticated equipment, which they did not back in the 1990s and early 2000s when that party was in power.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not really want to get into he said, she said and they did, we did. I want to ask a very simple question.

Business of Supply

Every one of us in this room knows that water is recognized as a right by the international community.

I have very young children. I have grandchildren, too. Would I want them growing up in communities where there is not clean water? I would say, categorically, no.

It makes very little difference to me that these little steps are being taken because today we still have children living in deplorable conditions without access to safe drinking water.

Is the government ready to commit all the necessary resources to ensure every Canadian child has access to clean drinking water, which is an internationally recognized human right?

Mr. Greg Rickford: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the passion with which the hon. member put her question. I would respond with a similar degree of passion by saying that the government took no little step in its action when between 2006-07 and 2012-13 budget cycles we have spent approximately \$2.5 billion on this file.

If the member wants inspiration, we can give her as many examples as she wants of grassroots-level approaches. People are getting technical certificates. Investments are being made in partnerships with colleges and organizations that can do the training. Facilities are being rehabilitated or replaced to deal with safe drinking water and with waste water treatment.

This government recognized this issue with respect to it international scope and implications. Our goal is to ensure that first nations communities, particularly communities in isolated and remote areas, get the technical support and infrastructure support they need to build the kind of infrastructure that would deliver on exactly what the member is asking.

•(1325)

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member gave a fine presentation. It was very informative, although some people may not appreciate the information. It may be too technical for them to absorb. We trust they will be okay with it.

I am wondering why the national assessment results demonstrated such a large increase in risk systems when compared to previous reporting done by the department. There seems to be quite a spike there. I am wondering if my colleague might touch on that for us.

Mr. Greg Rickford: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the important work that the member is doing with the members of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

As a leader in his province in education, he appreciates the essential education component that was built into our strategy, in co-operation with AFN leadership.

These are important issues; nobody disputes that. We have the same goals. For the first time in a very long time, we have a comprehensive, substantive plan that is already delivering on the results.

The national assessment has been the most rigorous and comprehensive evaluation of water and waste water systems on reserve ever undertaken. In the two years between July 2009 and spring 2011, engineers inspected many different on-reserve systems,

1,300 water and waste water systems, 800 wells and 571 first nations communities.

What they brought forward had to be dealt with in a comprehensive manner in co-operation with first nations stakeholders. The joint action plan and the water action plan with aboriginal communities across Canada had to be capable, unlike reports we had seen earlier in 2001 which were incomplete and fell well short of what was required.

We are working with haste toward the goal of safe drinking water and responsible waste water treatment.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a great pleasure to speak in this debate because, as many of my colleagues know, water issues are something in which I have a profound interest and have been working on almost since being elected in 2004. Of course, there is perhaps no more urgent water issue in this country today than the quality of drinking water available to our first nations people on first nations reserves.

It is vitally important, in a country like Canada, that no citizen living in a community, however small, be without access to potable water. It is impossible to understand how, in a country like Canada, citizens living in a community would not have access to water for sanitation. We know, and it has been said before in this House today and many times before today, that water is central to proper sanitation. Without proper sanitation, we have outbreaks of epidemics, like H1N1, because people cannot wash their hands or otherwise maintain proper sanitation. Therefore, the issue of quality drinking water and quality water for sanitation is not just a question of having access to the immediate household staple of quality water, it is a question of public health.

I must congratulate my hon. leader for sponsoring this motion today on such an important issue. The impetus for this motion comes from a report released in July 2011 called the National Assessment of First Nation Water and Wastewater Systems. Just by way of background, I will mention that the study covered 97% of first nations. Four first nations chose not to participate in the study but 97% of first nations were covered. Although I am not a statistician, I know that 97% coverage is a very strong sample size.

The study found that if we want to bring first nations drinking water up to standard, we need to spend a fair amount of money still. Even though there have been investments in the past, we need to spend \$1.08 billion in construction costs and \$79.8 million in non-construction costs to bring all existing systems up to INACs protocol standards. The non-construction costs would involve spending on operator training and the development of various kinds of plans.

Finally, the costs of new servicing, including construction, operation and maintenance costs over a 10 year period are estimated at \$4.7 billion. As members can see, there is a need for an infusion of resources if we are to do justice by our first nations people.

Business of Supply

I will go back to a 2005 report by the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development, which I read very carefully. From the report, we learned that 460,000 first nations people in Canada live on reserves, that Canada has about 600 first nations communities and that, of those communities, about 78,000 first nations people live in about 90 isolated communities without any year-round road access.

● (1330)

Providing potable water and access to water for sanitation to first nations is not an optional policy choice for the current government or any other government. The federal government has a fiduciary responsibility for the health and well-being of aboriginal Canadians living on first nations reserves. That is without dispute. This fiduciary responsibility includes ensuring that first nations communities have access to safe drinking water.

By way of information, the federal government exercises direct responsibility for first nations drinking water in those communities located south of 60, while the territorial governments do so for communities north of 60.

Again, by way of background, there are two federal departments that are the most directly involved in ensuring first nations communities have access to safe drinking water, one being what was formerly called the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, INAC, and the other being Health Canada. INAC funds the cost of building and maintaining first nations drinking water systems in communities. The department also covers the costs of operating and maintaining these systems, including the costs for training and certifying water system operators. In addition, the department tests source waters that supply first nations drinking water treatment plants. That is very important, and I will get into this a little later.

The efficacy of a water treatment plant depends, not only on the technology in that plant but also on the source water that is feeding that plant. Therefore, it is extremely important that we protect source water in Canada, specifically source water that is very close to drinking water treatment plants.

Health Canada, on the other hand, tests first nations drinking water at the tap. Health Canada works with first nations south of 60 to identify potential drinking water problems, including verification and monitoring of the overall quality of drinking water at the tap, and we are not talking about source water, and reviewing, interpreting and disseminating results to first nations.

Environment Canada is a third department. I said that there were two departments principally involved with the issue of first nations drinking water but Environment Canada is also involved. It is involved in giving advice and guidance in the area of source water protection.

A fourth department that is also involved is Public Works and Government Services Canada. Already we can see that this is a complex problem. Yes, it is a problem of money and a problem of political will but it is also a problem of the structure and the processes of government. I will come back to that a bit later.

What does Public Works and Government Services Canada do? Public Works and Government Services Canada provides Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development with technical services on the

design of water treatment plants. If the government were putting out tenders to build water treatment plants, obviously this would go through Public Works and Government Services and it would supply some technical specifications. We already have four departments involved.

I mentioned money and money is important. In fact, one of the reasons that first nations were against Bill S-11 was because it proposed a regime for creating regulations to govern drinking water on first nations reserves but there did not seem to be any money attached to that law. A law without the resources to implement the law is not much of a law at all. It is just wishful thinking. I would point out that spending on first nations water needs has not kept pace with the growth of the aboriginal population in Canada.

There is another problem with government when it comes to ensuring quality drinking water on first nations reserves. Yes, there are the four departments. They have complex relationships among themselves. Yes, there is the problem of not having enough money to solve this problem. There is also the problem that it is fundamentally a scientific issue.

● (1335)

Water policy must be based on science. Water policy requires that the government have the scientific resources to identify problems that need to be solved. I talked about how Environment Canada looks after the protection of source waters on first nations communities but it needs to have scientists to do that job properly. What we have seen in the last few years, and even more so at an accelerated pace, is that the government does not seem to have the resources to hire scientists. In fact, the talk at Fisheries and Oceans and at Environment Canada is that not only are scientists not allowed to speak and are muzzled and discouraged from doing their work, but we see that there will probably be, as a result of budget cuts, fewer and fewer scientists working inside Environment Canada and Fisheries and Oceans.

The atrophied state of federal water science is a component of this problem. It is not something that we notice right off the bat. We said that it was a question of money, of political will, and, yes, it is a question of those things, but when we scratch under the surface we cannot have good water policy, whether we are talking about water on first nations reserves or any other aspect of water policy, unless we have good science.

Here is what is extremely interesting and sadly ironic. There are no laws and regulations governing the provision of drinking water in first nations communities, unlike other communities in Canada. This is a situation where the federal government has a fiduciary responsibility to guarantee adequate drinking water to first nations and yet there are no laws or regulations governing the provision of drinking water in first nations communities.

What is even more ironic is that if people are nurses employed by the federal government working in a nursing station on a first nations reserve, or if they are employees of the Department of Foreign Affairs working in an embassy somewhere around the world, they are governed by regulations. The government must provide them with drinking water that is up to standard.

Business of Supply

This is not me speaking. It was mentioned by the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development. I will read a passage from his 2005 report:

Under the Canada Labour Code and the Occupational Safety and Health Regulations, every federally regulated employer has to provide its employees with drinking water that meets the standards set out in the Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality. Federal employees working in First Nations communities are covered by these regulations.

Is that not ironic? Aboriginal Canadians living in these communities are not covered by regulations but federal employees working there are. I will continue with the quote:

We found that in 2002 Health Canada installed small water treatment units in nursing clinics and health stations in at least 20 First Nations communities that were regularly experiencing drinking water safety problems. This was a result of Human Resources and Development Canada intervention to ensure that federal employees working in these facilities would be provided with safe drinking water as prescribed under the Canada Labour Code.

This is an irony that cannot be allowed to stand much further. This is obviously a glaring problem.

● (1340)

This is a complex issue and there is a scientist, Dr. Hans Peterson, who works in the north and who has dedicated a tremendous amount of time in his career to helping first nations communities solve their drinking water problems. He has found that water filtration is by no means a simple and straightforward matter. It is not a question of just installing, plugging in, and activating a filtration unit. The kind of filtration system a community requires depends on the quality of its source water, which I mentioned earlier.

This comes back to the issue of lack of coordination. In many cases, filtration system designers, who may even be located in an engineering firm in another country, have limited knowledge of the characteristics of source water in the community in question. Obviously, this is ironic.

According to Dr. Peterson, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, which was INAC at the time, appeared less than interested in the complexities of the relationship between source water type, filtration system design, and the quality of the treated water at the tap.

In the case of a water treatment plant being built in Saskatchewan, which goes back a couple of years, Dr. Peterson stated:

—INAC's only criteria for building a water treatment system in Saskatchewan is still an 'engineering stamp'. To the best of SDWF's knowledge, and in discussion with the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers, engineers have also not been given the opportunity to advise INAC on the most effective systems for different source waters, as INAC is only interested in requesting bids for, and purchasing, specific conventional water treatment systems that are chosen based on the cheapest bid.

It is not just a question of money or political will, it is a question of coordination among the various government departments that have something to say about first nations drinking water.

Again I will quote Dr. Peterson, who in this particular quotation seemed to be pointing to the lack of coordination between Health Canada and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. It is an old quotation. He stated:

INAC and HC do not appear to share data for source and treated waters and, as such, are unable to make sound decisions on effective treatment processes—

The list goes on and on.

There was a report published maybe three or four years ago which was published following consultations with first nations communities. What came out of that report was the recommendation that a first nations water commission be created where members of first nations could be brought together to share information relating to the provision of potable water in these communities. To my knowledge, the government has not acted on that recommendation. I think it is a good recommendation. It gets first nations communities involved in decision-making about water treatment in their communities. I would heartily recommend that the government pursue the issue and implement that recommendation.

Lastly, it is very important that the government not take the easy way out. Through legislation and regulation it should not impose provincial drinking water standards on first nations communities because not all provinces have drinking water standards that are at the level of the national drinking water guidelines. By doing so, it would skirt its federal responsibility, which would not be fair to the first nations people of the country.

● (1345)

Mr. Greg Rickford (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's comments at the very end. I thought it was one of the more important parts of his speech. That is exactly what we want to do, which is to develop a federal framework or piece of legislation that the federal government and the first nations communities can count on for enforceable standards.

What I always appreciate, although perhaps somewhat unfairly, and find ironic is when a member of the Liberal Party uses words like "fiduciary duty".

He mentioned nurses working in those isolated communities. Maybe he was not here when I spoke just prior, but I was actually a nurse working in these isolated communities between the years 1992 and 2006, and have taken my share of distilled bottled water showers when those fragile water systems failed. Therefore, I agree with the member that it is important and that we need legislation.

However, in the absence of real standards that the government and first nations could have counted on then, will the member support our piece of legislation coming forward that, in a profound, meaningful and substantive way, will attempt to bring in regulations for us all to depend on to ensure first nations have access to safe drinking water and appropriate waste water treatment?

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: First, Mr. Speaker, I would like to commend and congratulate the hon. member on the good work he did in the north in helping to provide health care for our aboriginal brothers and sisters. No doubt he would agree with the quote I read from the 2005 report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development.

Business of Supply

In terms of legislation and regulations, we would have to see what that legislation is, what those regulations are. We would have to know if there is money to back up the legislation. We would have to know if first nations communities agree with the legislation, if they feel they have been properly consulted, and again, as a member of the Liberal opposition, I want to avoid any possibility that the federal government would wash its hands of its fiduciary responsibilities for first nations drinking water by having provincial standards apply to these communities.

We need to have the best federal standards apply to these communities. Not only that, our federal standards need to be brought up to EPA standards similar to those in the U.S.

• (1350)

Mr. Mathieu Ravnat (Pontiac, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when I speak to the first nations in my community, whether it be Kitigan or Barriere Lake, there is just at this point an incredible amount of frustration.

This is a problem that has existed for decades. The Liberal and Conservative governments really have done very little to deal with the situation. Frankly, the people are at the end of their rope. They are impatient and I understand them.

I do support, of course, the principle of the motion, but I would like to hear the member's ideas as to why this extremely urgent issue has not been dealt with adequately in the decades that have transpired.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the experience the hon. member has on this issue by virtue of the fact that he has the Algonquins of Barriere Lake in his community. I have many good friends in that community. I do not know if he knows Dave Nawhegabow, someone I have known for a very long time.

Why have we not resolved this problem to this point? I agree it is very complex and technical. I mentioned that in addition to money and political will, which previous governments have had, the member would have to admit, there is a structural management and coordination problem within government.

It was the report, for example, of the Safe Drinking Water Foundation that helped us uncover that problem. I would hope that the government would address that problem as well as investing more money.

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would also like to commend the remarks made by my colleague and remind the House of his good work at the environment committee of several years ago which led to the new agreement between the federal government and the provincial government of Alberta, which is now monitoring water and water quality around the Athabasca River and the oil sands. I think folks should be reminded of that.

He did touch on the question of science cuts, which is eerily reminiscent of the cuts we saw, in my case, in my home province of Ontario some eleven years ago. Those cuts, science cuts and water inspection cuts, led to the terrible tragedy of Walkerton, where seven people died and 2,500 people were sick, some of whom are still battling with the terrible diseases that flowed from that tragedy.

What is perhaps most astonishing is that we actually have to remind the government of the urgency to act in this regard. We have

a Minister of Finance, a Minister of Foreign Affairs, a President of the Treasury Board, a Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, and a smattering of parliamentary secretaries and government MPs who served in the Ontario government and who were held responsible by Mr. Justice Dennis O'Connor in his report on the Walkerton crisis.

Why it takes the opposition Liberal Party, and the good work of my colleague here, and our leader to raise the urgency of this matter is all the more astonishing. Perhaps my colleague might take a moment to comment on that sense of urgency.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank the hon. member for his kind words for the work that we both did, and in fact that the Liberals did on the environment committee to raise the profile of an issue which actually had something to do with source water protection, and that was the monitoring of the impact of the oil sands on the Athabasca River watershed.

I travelled with the committee. We went up to Fort Chipewyan, and first nations citizens there were telling us that they feared that their source water was being polluted by deposits of deleterious substances from the oil sands industry.

The lesson of Walkerton teaches us that we need government supervision. Whenever we decide to cut back on government expenditures, we should be very careful not to cut back in areas that affect people's health. We should always give the benefit of the doubt to proper regulation and oversight by government over other considerations.

I would like to end with a little anecdote. We have heard of Walkerton. We have heard of problems in first nations communities. I live in a suburban riding. My riding covers the western tip of the island of Montreal. It is pure suburb. About a month ago all the cities in my riding were told they could not drink the water for four days. Fortunately, everything was okay.

We found out that everything was fine. The municipal authorities reacted very well. I was very proud of Mayor Bill McMurchie of Pointe-Claire and other mayors in the community, including John Meaney. I will say that panic started to set in, in a suburban community on the island of Montreal.

• (1355)

Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member just answered a question from one of his colleagues who asked why it has taken action by the Liberal Party to bring this to the government's attention when it is such an urgent issue.

I wonder if the member had maybe forgotten that, in fact, his party was in government for 13 years? It had 13 years to deal with this urgent issue, and it did not do it. I would just like the member to respond to that.

As well, the member brought up the issue of the oil sands and the feeling that there was contamination from the oil sands in the water supply. I am sure the member would, in fact, tell the House that the feeling may have been there, but the pollution was not there and the contamination was not there. Could the member comment on that as well?

Statements by Members

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Speaker, in terms of the oil sands, the member is forgetting that his government did a 180 degree turn on this issue.

Up until about a year and a half ago, the standard line coming out of PMO and the environment minister's office was that all traces of bitumen found in the Athabasca River were naturally occurring as the result of the oozing of bitumen from the banks of the Athabasca.

The work by Dr. David Schindler, Canada's foremost water scientist and one of the international community's great water scientists, proved through scientific study that there was a problem, and again we are coming back to the science. I would add that that study was not done with federal funds. He could not find federal funds to do the study. He did it on his own; a semi-retired aquatic biologist did the study. We backed him up in committee with our own policy study. As a result, the Minister of the Environment at the time had to get up and do a 180 and tell Canadians that in fact there was a problem in the oil sands.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest to the Liberals and Conservatives blaming each other for inaction on drinking water on first nations reserves.

I would like to take this opportunity to draw attention to the Pacheedaht First Nation in my riding. I met with its representatives last week. They have been waiting for more than a decade for a solution to their drinking water problems. Right now they run a rudimentary system of one pump and a backup. The backup no longer works.

If that fails, there will be an immediate health crisis on the Pacheedaht First Nation. It has had a proposal in to build its own filtration plant with new pumps. The proposal has been with INAC for five months. It is still waiting for an answer.

The last time the pumps broke down, it spent two years on bottled water. In that two years, INAC spent more than twice the amount of money on bottled water than it would have spent to build the filtration plant.

There is a great deal of frustration because the attitude at INAC seems to be that once again they are looking for a feasibility study from the regional district or a private company. INAC lacks confidence in the Pacheedaht First Nation to build and run its own system. This problem could have been solved years ago.

I would ask the member whether it is simply a technical problem or a coordination problem, or is it really a failure to trust a first nation and give it the resources it needs to solve its own problems?

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for raising that particular case, but I am not familiar with it.

When I say it is not always a matter of political will I am saying yes, there seems to be political will to solve the problem, but the political will cannot just be superficially expressed. In this particular case, the political will should translate into concrete action on the ground.

Yes, first nations peoples need to be involved in decisions regarding their water treatment plants. That is why the idea of a first nations water commission is a good one. I would go even further and

say that a first nations water commission should be an umbrella group and that each community should have a water council. Yes, there could be representatives from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Environment Canada, Health Canada, and Public Works and Government Services. We can get people talking and then translate the political will into action.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

● (1400)

[English]

HILLCREST LODGE

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I am pleased to bring attention to the success of an innovative seniors' housing initiative in my riding called Hillcrest Lodge.

For low-income seniors in our area facing illness, isolation and risks to their safety, Hillcrest is setting a new standard. It has created a community where quality housing, safety, good food and camaraderie have transformed the quality of life for some of our most vulnerable.

At Hillcrest, the cost of rent, utilities, meals and insurance is well below 60% of the average \$16,000 a year that a low-income senior lives on. The residents have independence; a safe, inviting home; and a caring staff. I hope the Hillcrest model will spur the creation of more of these affordable assisted-living communities in the years ahead.

I would like to take this time to congratulate the Hillcrest volunteer board of directors and their partners, like Helping Hands and Community Care Access. They are working together to make supportive assisted living a reality for seniors in our region.

* * *

[Translation]

DEMOCRACY

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in 1956 the Speaker of the House and hon. member for Vaudreuil-Soulanges, Louis-René Beaudoin, had to end his political career after shutting down an important debate on the construction of a pipeline. Closure of that debate caused such an uproar that chaos reigned in the House for weeks.

Here we are 55 years later and we see closure invoked on a weekly basis. Preventing debate has become a habit for this government. The Conservatives brag about how wonderful democracy is the world over, but they are having a hard time practising it here in this House.

What are they afraid of? Do they think that shutting down the debates will prevent Canadians from noticing the flaws and nonsense in their answers?

* * *

[English]

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Greg Rickford (Kenora, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have more good news to report for the great Kenora riding. AbitibiBowater recently announced they have purchased, and are fast under way in retooling and modernizing, a dormant building in the beautiful town of Ignace. More than 100 well-paying permanent jobs will return to the community very soon, just like the 600,000 other jobs our government has helped produce with Canada's economic action plan.

This is testament to the resolve and resilience of the folks in Ignace, who have always believed that their town has a future in forestry and other industries just on the horizon.

I want to thank the past and present mayors and councils with whom I have had the privilege of working and who have believed that if we could rehabilitate or replace critical infrastructure, Ignace would get a serious look from traditional and new industrial growth. That is exactly what Canada's economic action plan addressed in the Ignace area, putting Ignace in the best possible position for sustainability and growth.

Congratulations to AbitibiBowater and the citizens of Ignace. They are just another example of what is so great about the great Kenora riding.

* * *

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, for many years different governments have tried to tackle the challenges surrounding poverty in Canada. We are a rich country and we all do our best to help others, yet, as youth critic, it bothers me greatly to know that more than 65,000 young Canadians at any given time during the year can be homeless.

While all the different parties are working to find solutions to this issue, why not set a reminder or a time in our busy lives one day a year when we get to ask ourselves, what have we done to help put an end to youth homelessness?

A national youth homelessness awareness day would be that one small step in the right direction. We need all parties, together with the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development in particular, to come together and support this motion.

Let us show Canadians that when it comes to our young people and their well-being, we can do the right thing and be non-partisan in creating this annual reminder to us and to all that we need to address the root causes of youth homelessness.

* * *

• (1405)

FOREIGN CREDENTIAL RECOGNITION

Mr. Devinder Shory (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Mr. Speaker, thousands of Canadians still face challenges in having their foreign

Statements by Members

qualifications recognized, and I have promised my constituents that I will not let this issue die.

While many Canadians struggle to navigate confusing recognition pathways, life goes on. Hard-working foreign-trained professionals do what needs to be done: they drive cabs, clean offices, or work in warehouses, but many get stuck.

Now some people say that the safest place to have a heart attack in Canada might be the back seat of a taxi; the chances are that it is a doctor driving.

The foreign-trained professionals I have spoken with are thankful that our Conservative government is taking the lead in exploring new ways to shorten the qualifications recognition process. They are also encouraged to see all levels of government working co-operatively under the pan-Canadian framework to find ways to shorten and expedite the process.

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[Translation]

POVERTY

Mr. Alain Giguère (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am sad to say that there has been a sharp increase in poverty in the riding of Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, mainly due to the Conservatives' inaction. In fact, they have not acted decisively to counter job losses, especially in the industrial sector, where 350,000 jobs have been eliminated and replaced only by precarious, poorly paid and, often, part-time jobs.

At present, in my riding of Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, too many people have to use food banks and turn to social housing to have a roof over their heads at a reasonable cost.

There are people in my riding who run food banks, provide meals on wheels and work in community kitchens. They are much more compassionate than the members of the Conservative Party.

* * *

[English]

SALVATION ARMY

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to congratulate Salvation Army Commissioner Brian Peddle, and his wife, Commissioner Rosalie Peddle, on their appointments as the territorial commander for Canada and Bermuda, and territorial president of women's ministries, respectively.

Statements by Members

The Salvation Army is the largest non-governmental provider of social services in Canada. Last year, in 400 communities across our nation, the Salvation Army assisted over 1.6 million people in need, through addiction programs, homeless and street youth programs, palliative care and emergency disaster relief.

The Salvation Army has also been at the forefront of national and international efforts to end modern-day slavery by raising awareness in communities and providing invaluable shelter and rehabilitation to survivors.

I want to congratulate Commissioners Brian and Rosalie Peddle on their appointments and commend the Salvation Army for its commitment to the hope and dignity of all people.

* * *

HOLODOMOR MEMORIAL DAY

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on November 26 I encourage everyone to commemorate the victims of the Ukrainian genocide of 1932-33. In 2008, this day was enshrined in legislation as Holodomor Memorial Day after a bill was introduced by my distinguished colleague from Selkirk—Interlake.

The Holodomor represents a period when Stalin's Communist regime engineered a famine. Stalin's government imposed exorbitant grain quotas—in some cases confiscating supplies down to the last seed.

Soviet armed units surrounded the Ukrainian population in the Kuban region and in Ukraine, and prevented people from obtaining food in the neighbouring Soviet regions. The result was the death of millions, in what can only be described as one of the most horrific genocides in history.

As chair of the Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Friendship Group, I respectfully urge all members to take a few moments to remember the men, women and children who lost their lives in the Holodomor genocide.

* * *

WORLD PREMATURETY DAY

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, to mark the first World Prematurity Day, parents of premature babies and the staff from Edmonton neonatal intensive care units are today launching a campaign for extended parental leave to ensure proper care for infants born prematurely or with serious illnesses.

Some babies spend weeks to months in the intensive care unit. Some require multiple surgeries. Of necessity, the majority of paid parental leave is spent in hospital with the infants. As a result, the parents lose their usual one year at home with their healthy, well-developing child.

Doctors advise that parental participation in infant care is essential in intensive care, yet many families face ongoing challenges once home. These parents need and deserve additional time with their children before returning to work.

On behalf of these children and their families, I call on the government to extend the allowed one year of paid parental leave for any parents caring for premature infants.

* * *

● (1410)

[Translation]

NATIONAL FIELD LACROSSE CHAMPIONSHIP

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Eastern Townships received some great news when the Gaiters of Bishop's University in Lennoxville won the Canadian University Field Lacrosse Association's national championship.

The tournament was held in London, Ontario, on November 10.

Bishop's University defeated the Brock Badgers 11 to 6 in the finals. With a lead of 4 to 0, the Bishop's Gaiters prevented the Brock Badgers from scoring four consecutive times. Bishop's won the game with five unanswered goals in the last 25 minutes. The Gaiters' defence helped lead the team to its first national title.

I would like to congratulate this Quebec team of student athletes on its impressive victory in Canada's national summer sport.

Go Gaiters, go!

* * *

[English]

NATIONAL TRANSIT STRATEGY

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to address an urgent issue in my community of Newton—North Delta and in many cities across this country. The lack of public transit for hard-working Canadian families is abysmal. Challenging economic times make affordable, accessible transit all the more important. My community has grown at an astounding rate for the past two decades, yet investment in infrastructure has lagged.

Our party is calling for a national transit strategy, a permanent investment plan for environmentally responsible, quality transportation right across the country. Canada should be a leader on this issue. Instead, we are falling behind. Canada is the only country in the G8 without a national transit strategy.

I want to take this opportunity to urge the House to work with all levels of government to establish a national transit strategy that would benefit all hard-working Canadians.

* * *

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this week His Holiness Pope Shenouda III celebrated the 40th anniversary of his ordination as Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Anniversary celebrations recently took place in Egypt.

I would like to congratulate Pope Shenouda and his followers, many of whom live in my riding, on this very special occasion.

Our government remains very concerned about the recent violence in Egypt. Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right. I am so proud to see that our government is following through on its promise to create an office of religious freedom. While still in its planning stages, the process of establishing this office is well under way.

I am also pleased to highlight that last week our government communicated directly to the UN Secretary-General the motion unanimously adopted by the House that called for an investigation into the recent violence. Canada has been clear that the violence must stop.

Our government will continue to advocate on behalf of all people of faith around the world in order that they may be able to worship in peace and security.

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TOM KENT AND FRASER MUSTARD

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last night, Canada lost two of its most creative progressive thinkers with the passing of Tom Kent and Fraser Mustard.

Tom Kent served all Canadians in his many roles as journalist, editor, public servant and author, but his greatest legacy was his role in working on the groundbreaking social innovations that characterized the Pearson administration, including our national medicare system and the Canada Pension Plan.

Tom never tired from his crusade, working later in Cape Breton, and authoring solutions for social reforms well into his eighties. I can tell members that he never shrank from challenging the leaders of today when he felt they were not doing enough to advance the cause of progress.

I also want to mark the passing of another great social reformer and a good friend, Dr. Fraser Mustard, who sadly also left us last night.

Fraser helped to build McMaster's medical school, was a pioneer in occupational health and the development of centres of excellence, and can really be called the father of early childhood development in Canada. He advised governments in Canada and around the world and was a tireless worker for better policy and better lives.

All Canadians owe Tom Kent and Dr. Fraser Mustard a debt of gratitude for their pivotal roles in shaping our nation.

Let us all resolve to take up the torch of these two great men and resolve to strive to make Canada an even more equitable, more just and more progressive nation.

* * *

●(1415)

YUKON

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week I had the honour of being in my wonderful riding of Yukon. During the busy week, I was pleased to announce \$900,000 in federal government funding to Yukon College for geoscience and geohydro technology

Statements by Members

programs. This will help Yukon students and workers gain certification for highly skilled work in the mining industry. An additional \$1.3 million for training simulators was given to the Yukon Mine Training Association, both were through CanNor.

While the member for Western Arctic criticizes CanNor, votes against the Dempster highway extension from Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk and refrains from standing to vote for his constituents to end the long gun registry, our government, our Prime Minister and this member of Parliament are making the north and the people there a priority.

* * *

[Translation]

CAMPAIGN FINANCING

Ms. Ève Péclet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative Party pleaded guilty to election fraud in the amount of \$1.3 million. The party had to pay a \$52,000 fine, yet the Conservatives referred to this as a victory. Really? A victory? Certainly, the fine is not that big a deal for a party that kept \$187,000 in illegal rebates from Canadian taxpayers.

The hon. member for Cypress Hills—Grasslands' campaign received \$1,900 in illegal rebates. The hon. member still owes Canadians this money. The hon. member for Beauce's campaign owes Canadian taxpayers \$3,000. The campaign of the hon. member for Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière and that of the Minister of Veterans Affairs each owe Canadian taxpayers \$14,000.

Taxpayers should never have to foot the bill for politics. The Prime Minister must ensure that every penny that was taken from taxpayers is given back to them immediately.

* * *

[English]

NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the anti-trade NDP is at it again. With its anti-Canada campaign in Washington, the NDP continues to attack the Canadian economy and good jobs. Members of the NDP do not just want to put hundreds of thousands of Canadians who work directly in the oil sands out of work, but they also want to shut down a further seven major industries, including Canada's mining sector, the seal industry, the forestry sector in B.C., auto manufacturing, the trucking industry, the nuclear sector and the GM food sector. The NDP opposed creating jobs and it is actively attacking Canada abroad.

Ironically, even the private sector union bosses disagree with the NDP and its job-killing stance against the oil sands. Unions representing hundreds of thousands of engineers, electrical workers, pipe fitters and other trades are lining up against the NDP attacks on their jobs.

Undermining the economy and attacking Canadian jobs are yet more worrying examples that the ineffective, disunited NDP is unfit to govern.

*Oral Questions***ORAL QUESTIONS***[English]***PENSIONS**

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, day after day Canadian families sit and watch as their private savings evaporate on the stock market. Hard-hit families do not know how they will pay the bills, let alone how they will afford to retire.

Instead of taking practical steps to strengthen the guaranteed CPP and QPP, the government wants them to roll the dice with even more of their retirement savings.

Why is the out-of-touch Prime Minister forcing Canadians to play retirement roulette on the tumbling TSX?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have absolutely no idea what the Leader of the Opposition is talking about.

What I do know is that today the government announced another step forward on the pooled registered retirement savings plan, something that has been welcomed by pension experts and the small business community across the country. Canadians are looking for options. Canadians are not looking for a hike in their CPP premiums, as advocated by the NDP.

• (1420)

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the facts speak for themselves. In the last quarter alone, the CPP outperformed the markets ten to one.

[Translation]

The markets are tanking around the world, but the Conservatives want Canadians to invest even more of their hard-earned money in those markets without any guarantee that doing so will pay off one day.

What is the government's plan for families who are bogged down in debt and do not even have any money to save? What does the government suggest they do? Should they never retire?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today's announcement of a new retirement savings tool for companies and individuals was well received by the business community, small and medium-sized enterprises and Canadians across the country. Canadians are not looking for a hike in their CPP premiums, as advocated by the NDP.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, why would Canadians believe this government, which is sitting idly by while jobs are disappearing at an alarming rate? Just yesterday, we learned that 600 workers at the White Birch plant in Quebec City will be out of a job just before Christmas. While the number of unemployed workers is on the rise, the number of employment insurance claimants is dropping because fewer and fewer workers qualify for benefits.

The question for the Prime Minister is very simple, and Canadians want an answer: where is his plan to create jobs?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are well aware that the world economy presents challenges and that, from time to time, jobs are lost in Canada. When this sort of thing happens, we work with the communities.

[English]

It is important to say that what we do on this side of the House is work on employment and job creation. We have measures before the House to do that. What we do not do is what the NDP does, which is demand that industries be shut down, demand that taxes be raised on employers and go to other countries to fight against Canadian trade. On this side of the House, we are dedicated to fighting for Canadian jobs, not against Canadian jobs.

* * *

PENSIONS

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today the minister said that when we buy in bulk, we save money. That is certainly true with the CPP and the QPP. In the last quarter, the CPP outperformed the markets by a ten to one factor. The chief actuary says that CPP is funded for 70 years. Increasing CPP and QPP will mean money in the pockets of retiring seniors.

Why is the government's only plan to line the pockets of mutual fund managers? Why will it not increase the CPP now?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the fact remains that today we have a good news story. We have introduced a very new pooled registered pension plan that will help millions of Canadians who otherwise have not saved for retirement.

I have to question the member's commitment to that statement when people within the CFIB have said time and time again that if we raise CPP, they are very worried about jobs, and right now we are concentrating on jobs and the economy and our low-tax plan to maintain those.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister in charge of this file knows that we have been willing to work with him; in fact, we have been working with him for the past three years. New Democrats have been standing up for the tried and true Canada pension plan because that is Canadians' best option to be protected. How can people trust the government to help them when pensioners call Service Canada and are put on hold because there are not enough people? Reckless Conservative cuts at Service Canada are leaving pensioners in the cold. They are waiting months to get their cheques.

Why is the government choosing risky schemes and reckless cuts over the needs of vulnerable seniors?

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that union leaders, who are clearly very convincing for members of the opposition, are selfishly attempting to ensure that old, inefficient and labour-intensive methods of processing EI applications remain in place. Our government's top priority is to get Canadians back to work and to promote economic growth. We are committed to providing timely service to all Canadians who access these systems.

* * *

• (1425)

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today in the House we are debating the question of an effective strategy for clean running water for every single Canadian across the country, and it seems to have the support of all parties as we move forward.

I would like to ask the Prime Minister, since his party has announced it is supporting this measure, to outline what he is going to do to ensure there will be clean drinking water for every single Canadian within a fixed time point.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is no need for me to outline today that the government is willing to take action on this. The government has been taking action over the past several years. We have made significant investments in this very objective because it is important for communities, particularly native communities across Canada.

What is not explicable is why the Liberal Party continually votes against these investments, so I welcome today the Liberal Party's conversion to doing something about this issue.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we can argue about conversion dates at some other point, but let me draw the attention of the Prime Minister to one particular issue which I think requires a broader solution than the one he is prepared to take on.

The other day I visited the Six Nations reserve, which is the most highly populated reserve in the country. It has a serious drinking water problem. There are 315 homes that have no water supply whatsoever.

At the same time as the Minister of Canadian Heritage is announcing a program with respect to the War of 1812, those people who were there for Canada in 1812 to 1814 have still not had recognition of a large fundamental land claim that speaks to the land that was stolen from them over the last two centuries.

What is the Prime Minister going to do on that issue?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the Liberal Party should know that obviously land claim negotiations in this particular area have been difficult and have been ongoing for some time, but we continue to work to try to get them resolved.

[Translation]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Ontario government has clearly said that this has been going on for centuries. The federal government itself recognized this fact when it made an

Oral Questions

offer of more than \$100 million, which was turned down by the aboriginal negotiators. The Ontario government has agreed to the appointment of a mediator, but the Government of Canada refuses to appoint one.

If the government is serious, why is it not appointing a mediator to work through this major problem?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, negotiations have been ongoing for decades, at least. This government has made offers, as the leader of the Liberal Party said.

[English]

The fact of the matter is these are extremely complex negotiations. They are particularly complex given the governance structure on the other side, but we continue to work to try and get this problem resolved.

* * *

[Translation]

NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague and I went to Washington to tell the Americans that the majority of Canadians are opposed to the Keystone project. Our party is doing the work that the Conservatives refuse to do.

[English]

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Claude Gravelle: Mr. Speaker, instead of hurling insults, maybe they should stand up for Canadians.

[Translation]

The environmental consequences of the Keystone—

[English]

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. member has about four or five seconds to complete his question.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Gravelle: Mr. Speaker, that is also what Canadians wanted.

Will the government finally understand that it needs to come up with a plan to protect our jobs and our environment?

[English]

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the NDP would rather fly to Washington than listen to thousands of Canadians employed in the oil sands. Maybe they will listen to union leaders like Christopher Smillie, who represents 200,000 workers. He said “The NDP would be very bad for workers and the entire Canadian economy. They haven't risen to the task”.

If the NDP will not rise to the task of supporting Canadian jobs and they are hostile to Canadian employers, whose interests do they represent in this country?

*Oral Questions***THE ENVIRONMENT**

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House we talk with our trading partners and not at them.

We went to Washington to ensure that the voices of all Canadians were being heard, something that the government refuses to do. In Washington they are moving forward with trade on clean energy products and a clean energy economy, but because of Conservative inaction, Canada is being left behind.

These are Canadian jobs we are talking about. When will the government stop the attacks, stop the environmental inaction and move forward on building a clean energy economy for the future?

• (1430)

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there have been historic diplomatic trips; the allies to Yalta and Nixon to China come to mind. The sad NDP junket to Washington will not merit a footnote in the history books. However, it is a classic example of how far a party can be disconnected from the real concerns and real needs of ordinary Canadians, especially jobs and social services.

The official opposition is not ready for prime time.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if standing up for clean air and water and good Canadian jobs is sad and disconnected, bring it on.

Most Canadians do not want to sell out our environmental future and lose thousands of Canadian jobs to a risky pipeline. Our out-of-touch Prime Minister has said it is a no-brainer, but really it is a non-starter. Now he is talking about pushing a pipeline through the Rockies and through first nations areas, but Americans have said no to risky pipelines in sensitive areas.

When will the Prime Minister stop listening to the oil lobby and start listening to Canadians?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the emissaries are back from their job-killing trip to Washington. They apparently felt it was their patriotic duty to block an important project that will generate jobs, economic activity and energy security. This is precisely the wrong time to block shovel-ready projects.

Out of compassion for my fellow parliamentarians, I recommend the book *Economics for Dummies*.

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[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Americans are seriously considering backing out of the F-35 program. It is clear what will happen if the Americans pull out. There will be no F-35 program. Yesterday, right here in the House, the Associate Minister of National Defence said, "... not only is there a plan B, but there is a plan A".

Now that it is clear that plan A is not working, will the minister finally tell us what plan B is?

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, all reasonable people agree that the Canadian Forces require a fighter fleet to face the challenges of the 21st century. The best plane and the only state-of-the-art stealth aircraft available to Canada to face the challenges of the next 30 years is the F-35 joint strike fighter.

Our plan is on track. We continue to monitor this investment closely through direct contact with Lockheed Martin and the F-35 joint project team. The Minister of National Defence and I will be in Halifax this weekend and will be meeting with the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Mr. Panetta.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the communications equipment does not work in the north, pilots are not safe and costs are skyrocketing. Everyone is facing the facts and admitting that the F-35 program is not working—everyone except the Associate Minister of National Defence, who has buried his head in the sand.

How much longer will the Prime Minister allow his Associate Minister of National Defence to defend the indefensible? When will the Prime Minister himself launch an open, transparent and public bidding process?

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me repeat that our plan is on track. We continue to monitor this investment. We are working towards progress. The planes are coming off the production line. Pilots are flying them. They are being delivered to the joint strike fighter team.

Not only that, unlike the NDP travelling to the U.S. in an effort to kill and derail thousands of Canadian jobs, when we meet with U.S. authorities, it is to create Canadian jobs.

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the only competition that has ever taken place for the F-35 has been between the Minister of National Defence and the Associate Minister of National Defence.

Yesterday, the Associate Minister of National Defence said there is no problem, no delays, but there is a plan B. Then Conservative officials told us there are many plans. Then moments later, the Minister of National Defence told us that in fact there are problems and long delays.

I have a simple question for whoever is in charge today. If the government has a plan B for replacing our fighter jets, what is it?

Oral Questions

●(1435)

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, all reasonable people agree that the Canadian Forces require fighter jets to do the job for the challenges of the 21st century. The best plane and the only state-of-the-art stealth aircraft available to Canada to face the challenges of the next 30 years is the F-35 joint strike fighter.

Our plan is on track. We continue to monitor this investment closely through direct contact with Lockheed Martin, as well as the U.S. authorities and the project team. There is no trading our commitment. There is no downgrading of the commitment. We are there. We are on track.

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, since we are trading literary recommendations today, I hear there is a new publication called “Buying Jets for Dummies”. I recommend it to the Associate Minister of National Defence.

The Associate Minister of National Defence clearly said that there are no problems, but there is a plan B. The minister said there are problems, but there is no plan B. Americans and others understand that the F-35s are behind schedule and massively over budget. Perhaps the ministers could ask the U.S. Secretary of Defense about his plan B.

Here at home, New Democrats have a great plan B: put the file out to tender. Will they?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, maybe the hon. member could lend me his copy of the book.

In any event, I am not going to get into the rhetoric. I can guarantee that the plan is on track. We are sticking with the program. The planes are coming off the production line. They are being flown by pilots who know their business. I prefer to listen to them and to the experts rather than the idle chatter from the opposite side.

* * *

FIREARMS REGISTRY

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this morning the Quebec public safety minister appeared in committee to prevent the government from scrapping the gun registry and destroying its data. What was the government's response? A deafening silence. Instead, it attacked the credibility of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. We also learned that the Prime Minister refused to meet with the Dawson Student Union following the shooting in 2006.

Why is the government refusing to listen to the Government of Quebec, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, and victims?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the answer is quite simple. Our Conservative government does not support treating law-abiding hunters, farmers and sport shooters as criminals. We have consistently opposed this wasteful and ineffective measure, which does nothing to keep guns out of the hands of criminals.

Canadians gave our government a strong mandate to end the long gun registry once and for all, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, since we are talking about books, I also have a book to recommend. It is called “Democracy for Dummies”.

[*Translation*]

Not only is the government completely ignoring all appeals, but it is also preventing parliamentarians from doing our jobs by shutting down debate in committee—and not just any committee, the justice committee. Could anything be more undemocratic?

Canadians have already paid for the data—extremely useful data—in the firearms registry and, rightly so, the provinces would like to have that data back.

Will this government finally stop mocking our democracy and give Canadians back the data that belong to them?

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of State (Small Business and Tourism), CPC): Mr. Speaker, public policy must be judged by its real effects on the ground, and not by its intentions. When it comes to real effects, the part of the firearms registry dealing with long guns has never in any way helped prevent crime in Canada. Furthermore, regarding the data, I would like to remind my colleague what the Auditor General said on September 26, 2006:

We found the information in the database to have significant quality problems:

...

Verification frequently determined that information on the weapon's action, make or serial number was wrong.

* * *

●(1440)

[*English*]**CANADIAN WHEAT BOARD**

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first the government robbed wheat farmers of their right to vote. Now we know the minister is taking wheat farmers' money to fund his folly.

In an eleventh hour act of desperation, the government has increased the cap on the Wheat Board's contingency fund from \$60 million to \$200 million to fund its own ideological obsession with killing the single desk. That is money that should rightfully be returned to farmers.

When did the government get into highway robbery and when will the minister do the right thing and give farmers back their hard-earned money?

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course, this contingency fund has always been held separately from farmers' pool accounts. As a government, we took this prudent measure to protect the future of western Canadian farmers, Canadian taxpayers and, of course, the new voluntary wheat board.

Mr. Oberg continues to waste millions of dollars of farmers' money on his own personal political agenda. Since it is unclear what additional liabilities he will leave behind with his scorched earth policy, we have taken this prudent step.

Oral Questions

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is nothing prudent about what the government is doing. Elected farm directors are abiding by their oath of office. It is too bad the minister could not do the same. The minister knows the contingency fund is a result of the current board's management and comes from farmers' grain sales. His increasing the fund by executive order is an admission of greater risk under his government board. However, to expropriate millions of dollars of farmers' money is akin to theft.

How can the minister justify taking farmers' money to run his government-controlled grain company?

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am disappointed, like western Canadian farmers. I thought, since the member for Malpeque grew that third eyebrow, he would see clearly the need for freedom in marketing for western Canadian farmers. We are going to hold that money in trust for western Canadian farmers for the new voluntary wheat board and ensure they have a chance at a vibrant future.

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[Translation]

AIR TRANSPORTATION

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons misled Parliament when he said that the government used the Challenger jets only 24 or 25 times a year.

In reality, the government has used those planes no less than 71 times a year. Will the government House leader apologize?

[English]

Or, does he want to borrow a book that I just acquired called "Flying Challenger Jets for Dummies"?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will concede that, when it comes to flying Challenger jets, we have a lot to learn from a former Liberal cabinet minister. When we compare our record with the Liberal record, there is no comparison. The Liberals have us beaten by 100,000 kilometres, I bet, if not far more. They were in the air all the time. It is a hard thing to come down to earth like they have. However, when it comes to the use of Challenger jets, it is lower under our government than it has been under any other government in years.

* * *

[Translation]

SMALL BUSINESS

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today we have more evidence that this government has no credible plan to help small business and that the so-called plans they have, such as the Canada small business financing program, are working poorly, if at all.

It is outrageous that Industry Canada had no comment to make on allegations that funds have been diverted from the program. The minister absolutely must fix this program to ensure that it can fulfill its role and truly help small businesses.

Can the minister tell us today how much money Industry Canada has lost in this program by paying down loans for businesses that declared bankruptcy because they did not receive any really effective help?

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of State (Small Business and Tourism), CPC): Mr. Speaker, as far as help for businesses and entrepreneurs is concerned, I am very proud of this government's record. We have reduced the tax rate to 11% for small businesses and, effective January 1, 2012, to 15% for all businesses in Canada. That is a realistic record. It is a concrete record that is important for small businesses. As far as any potential fraud is concerned, I encourage people who witness illegal acts or fraud to file complaints with the appropriate authorities. It is a serious matter. Taxpayers' money is at stake.

[English]

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian small business financing program has failed to help the companies it was supposed to support. Now we are seeing fraud in the government's program. It is not the first time the government has dropped the ball in these matters. Consumers and small businesses are still getting gouged because the government refuses to cut merchant fees for credit cards.

Why has the government abandoned Canadian workers and small businesses?

• (1445)

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of State (Small Business and Tourism), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to be very clear in what I said in French.

All Canadians, who know something about that or who are witnesses on some front, must declare that to the authorities because it is important. It is taxpayer money and we take that very seriously.

* * *

CANADIAN WHEAT BOARD

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last week, the Minister of Agriculture accused the elected Wheat Board members of stealing farmers' money. However, now we know the truth. The minister is planning to keep \$200 million of farmers' hard-earned money, a \$200 million grain tax. Not only is the government hauling out the single desk, it is picking farmers' pockets in the process. This is farmers' money, not the government's.

When will the minister give it back?

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what western Canadian farmers are looking for is an opportunity to market their own grain, durum and barley, and we will give them that opportunity.

The contingency fund is there. The Wheat Board has used it at times, like a slush fund. We want to ensure that Mr. Oberg's sticky little fingers stay out of that, as they have been dipping into the pool accounts on farmers, spending tens of millions of dollars buying boats, spending like drunken sailors.

We will not allow that to happen. We will hold that contingency fund and help western farmers use that money in their own best interests.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the farmers he intends to give it back to are the ones who are actually leaving and do not get it.

It is really simple. The government promised to allow Wheat Board farmers a vote and it broke that promise. Now the government is imposing a \$200 million grain tax on western farmers.

Last week, the government agreed to join the trans-Pacific partnership but will not tell Canadians if supply management is on the table.

The government sold out western farmers. Will it do the same thing to supply managed farmers across this country as it did to western farmers this week?

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government respects the hard-working families who work on our dairy and poultry farms and who gather eggs every day so we can have them for breakfast. They respect that in us. We have been there for them when they need us.

We have a tremendous working relationship with the supply managed sector. We had it in our campaign platform. Those members did not. We put it in the throne speech. They voted against it. Who do members suppose supply managed farmers support? It is this side of the House.

* * *

PENSIONS

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government's top priority is the economy and jobs. We are working for Canadians to support economic certainty and financial security.

I know the Minister of State for Finance has been travelling across Canada talking to our provincial partners, small business and others about improving our retirement income system.

Could the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance update Parliament on our government's legislation for a pooled registered retirement pension plan?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this summer, the Minister of State for Finance travelled to every province and territory to talk about the pooled registered pension plan. We wanted to improve retirement savings for Canadians, especially workers in small business and the self-employed, which is why we introduced legislation on the pooled registered pension plan today. This great, low cost savings option will help future retirees build their retirement nest eggs.

Oral Questions

I hope all parliamentarians will support this very good measure. I hope the NDP abandons its plans to convince other countries to terminate jobs here in Canada.

* * *

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY TO THE PRIME MINISTER

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the question is whether or not the government will ignore the warning from the senior parliamentary law clerk that the behaviour of the member for Peterborough at the ethics committee is both illegal and undermines the independence of the court.

Instead of giving an answer, the Minister of Canadian Heritage has been giving us a smoke and mirrors show, ranting about shotguns, the Wheat Board and the state of the beleaguered Canadian taxpayer.

However, a question remains. In the government's attack on the CBC, is it willing to undermine the independence of the Canadian courts?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, all the member for Peterborough is doing is what parliamentary committees are supposed to do.

Earlier this year, the previous Speaker of the House, Peter Milliken, said that parliamentary committees can ask for whatever documents those parliamentary committees want.

The member for Peterborough is simply asking that the CBC be accountable for the taxpayers' money that it receives. That is not an attack on the CBC. That is a mandate that the member for Peterborough received from his voters to come to Ottawa and ask for accountability. He is doing his job.

Why is the NDP standing against accountability and against responsible spending at the CBC?

● (1450)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if this were about accountability to taxpayers, the Conservatives would have given the member for Peterborough the job of cramping the style of the high-flying Muskoka minister who blew through \$50 million, cannot remember how it was done, had absolutely no receipts but assures us that every Tory in Muskoka had a good time.

Accountability is about respecting the divisions of the Constitution. That was the question that was put to the parliamentary clerk.

The question remains: Is he flying solo or is this part of a larger government plan to undermine the independence of our Canadian courts?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I see my hon. colleague has his tinfoil conspiracy hat firmly on today.

All the member for Peterborough is doing is asking for accountability. CBC receives a lot of money from taxpayers and taxpayers want to know how the money is being spent. It is very simple and very straightforward.

Oral Questions

With regard to parliamentary committees, they can ask for any document they want or any witness they want to come before committees to fulfill that mandate.

The member for Peterborough is standing up for taxpayers and the member for Timmins—James Bay is standing in his way. Why is he fighting against the interests of taxpayers? That is the question that should be answered. Why is he against taxpayers' interests?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this government really has a strange way of doing things. On the one hand it lets one member do whatever he wants and request documents that are the subject of an ongoing court battle. That undermines the separation of powers between the legislative and judicial branches. What is more, the parliamentary law clerk deemed that this was unlawful. On the other hand, the President of the Treasury Board said, “oh, sure”, promising to hand over handwritten documents that he himself used to authorize \$50 million in spending for gazebos in his riding. We are still waiting for those documents.

Will he hand them over today?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, by attacking the member for Peterborough, what the NDP is doing is showing that it has no regard for the accountability of the CBC or other organizations. It has no regard for the needs of taxpayers across the country. The member for Peterborough is doing his job. It is as simple as that.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am sad to see that the President of the Treasury Board has a new spokesperson today. So that he fully understands the question I just asked, I will try to be as simple and clear as possible. Canadians have a right to know exactly how that money was distributed in Parry Sound—Muskoka. The member for Parry Sound—Muskoka has 242 forms sitting in drawers in his constituency office in Huntsville. Twice, he told everyone that he would hand them over.

Will he keep his word and finally hand over these documents?

[*English*]

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what an astonishing double standard by the NDP.

The President of the Treasury Board and the former minister of infrastructure appeared before a parliamentary committee and testified with regard to this matter.

All the member for Peterborough is doing is saying that the CBC should be accountable before committee.

All we are saying is that the CBC should be elevated to the same level of accountability and responsibility as the President of the Treasury Board has already demonstrated.

The NDP demanded accountability from the President of the Treasury Board and he answered the call. All we are doing is asking for accountability from the CBC. It is pretty straightforward.

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in September, I wrote to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development to outline the Liberal position on any Conservative legislation on first nations water. There can be no bill without meaningful consultation and no bill without adequate and sufficient resources.

Will the minister commit today to these basic principles advocated by first nations and parliamentary committees, as well as the government's own expert panel on safe drinking water?

When will 100% of first nations have access to safe drinking water and the capacity to maintain them?

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in regard to the Liberal motion today and the whole question of first nations water and waste water, we do intend to introduce legislation this year on water and waste water.

This is a recommendation that has come forward from Senate committees, the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development and every other expert who has looked at this whole question of providing appropriate water and waste water on reserve. That is what—

• (1455)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Winnipeg North.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the United Nations declared that access to clean water was a basic human right. For the community of Red Sucker Lake to access water, it is quite the challenge. Unlike most Canadians, people do not go to the kitchen and turn on the water. It involves pails and leaving the house. These types of conditions are unacceptable. We need strong federal leadership on this issue.

Does the government actually have a plan, a strategic timeframe, that would ensure that quality water is—

The Speaker: Order. The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has been taking action to improve first nations communities' access to safe drinking water and reliable waste water. We had a national first nations water action plan.

The Liberals have no credibility on this issue. We inherited a mess after 13 years of Liberal government. We have invested \$2.5 billion since 2006 in first nations water and infrastructure. We have done a national assessment. We know where our focus and priorities should be.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

THE ECONOMY

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, another Canadian winter will soon begin and families are already wondering how they will survive. With heating costs continuing to soar, too many families will have to choose between keeping warm and having food to eat. This is not a choice that Canadian families should have to make.

Why is this government not listening to the New Democrats and removing the federal tax on home heating? Why does it not give families a break this winter?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the NDP is talking about jobs and the economy, and asking how we can help families when they have bills to pay. I will say it once again: we must ask the New Democrats why they continue to go to Washington and elsewhere to eliminate jobs. It is through these jobs that Canadian families will be able to pay their bills. One has to wonder why the NDP is always trying to eliminate jobs in Canada that would help families to pay for everything they need in this world today.

[English]

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that answer will not help families heat their homes. Even the government's Conservative cousins in Ontario know that listening to New Democrats is the right thing to do. They agree with taking the sales tax off home heating, but the out-of-touch government does not get it. Canada gets cold; heating one's home is not a luxury.

When will the government get onside with its Conservative cousins and work with New Democrats to give families a break?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to remind the House about the 120 taxes that were cut so that Canadians could keep more money in their pockets to pay for all of these things. There are \$3,000 more in the hands of Canadians today thanks to this government. Every single time we put a measure forward, the NDP voted against it.

Let us think about those jobs that the NDP is trying to kill. There are hundreds of thousands of jobs in the oil sands and the NDP is trying to kill those jobs. These are jobs that families need to pay for home heating. Let us not forget the GST. Who voted against that? The NDP.

* * *

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Winnipeg South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, after years of Liberal inaction on first nations water and waste water, the NDP consistently voted against critical investments in first nations communities. The opposition is finally taking notice of this important issue.

Can the minister update the House on what action our government has taken since coming to office?

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, finally a sensible question.

Our government is committed to taking action to improve first nations communities' access to safe drinking water and reliable waste water treatment facilities. We have invested \$2.5 billion since 2006.

I am proud to announce today that in addition to those ongoing commitments, we are also providing an additional \$5.5 million to support infrastructure improvements in Manitoba's Island Lake community. In fact, my officials will be meeting with the Island Lake first nations tomorrow. We are getting—

• (1500)

The Speaker: Order, please.

The hon. member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor.

* * *

CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, I noticed the member for Mississauga East—Cooksville, during the presentation of petitions, put in a petition to completely cut off CBC/Radio-Canada. What was astonishing was that sitting next to him was the member for Calgary West, gleefully applauding the fact that the Conservatives are going to eliminate CBC/Radio-Canada.

My question is for the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages. He talks tough to us about how he wants to support the CBC, but it is not us he has to talk to, it is the people behind him. They are the problem.

This is a simple question. The member for Calgary West—

The Speaker: Order, please.

The hon. Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages has the floor.

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, God forbid Canadians sign a petition.

If my colleague wants me to adopt the Liberal position on the CBC, that radical right-wing paper, *The Toronto Star*, said that the CBC was treated shabbily by the Liberal government, downsized, underfunded, abandoned. Another newspaper said that the Liberal policy toward the CBC was to gut it, kick it in the teeth and leave it hanging by a thread.

That is the Liberals' policy. They cut the CBC by \$400 million. If the member's position is that we should adopt the Liberal position, maybe he should put a petition forward on that.

The Speaker: Order, please. There is far too much noise. The Chair is having an increasingly difficult time hearing both the question and the answer.

The hon. member for Edmonton—Strathcona has the floor. We will have a little bit of order.

*Oral Questions***ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS**

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when is an advocate for aboriginal children considered an enemy of the state? Apparently, when she files a human rights complaint about wilful underfunding of welfare services for first nations children.

That is all that Cindy Blackstock of Canada's First Nation Child and Family Caring Society did. Since that day, more than 19 justice and other federal officials have accessed, inappropriately, her status Indian file and personal information.

Why is the government spying on Cindy Blackstock?

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we take Canadians' privacy very seriously. I have asked my deputy minister to report on whether privacy rules were respected in this case.

* * *

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has invested more in science and technology than any other Canadian government in history. We are pleased that Canada leads the G7 for our support of higher education, research and development. The reputation of our government is unmatched.

Can the Minister of State for Science and Technology and the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario please update the House on what our government is doing to ensure that Canada's research reputation is protected?

Hon. Gary Goodyear (Minister of State (Science and Technology) (Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can certainly do that. I am happy to announce today that our government is taking an important step to further protect Canada's reputation as a world leader in research and development.

Effective today, all research funding applicants through the NSERC, SSHRC or the CIHR will be asked to waive the right not to be named if they commit a serious breach of agency policy.

While misconduct in research is very rare, it is important to make sure the integrity of Canadian research and Canadian researchers is protected, and we are doing just that.

* * *

[Translation]

TRANSPORT CANADA

Ms. Éleine Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the municipality of Neuville was forced to accept the construction of an airport in its community, even though the municipal council and the residents are opposed to this project. The Canada Transportation Act is out of touch with reality in municipalities like Neuville. Developers can locate anywhere they want, without consulting the municipalities, if Transport Canada gives them the authorization to do so.

Will the minister commit to meeting with the mayor of Neuville and all the other mayors who have concerns about this law?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind the hon. member that, in Quebec, mayors fall under the jurisdiction of the Quebec ministry of municipal affairs, regions and land occupancy. We have always been in the habit of respecting the jurisdictions of each sector. I am happy to speak to the minister, Laurent Lessard. He would be happy to speak to the mayors of all the regions of Quebec who are under his responsibility. With regard to transportation safety as it relates to airports, Transport Canada's main role is to ensure the security of airports and the safety of all travellers. We will continue to do this.

* * *

● (1505)

FIREARMS REGISTRY

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Quebec could not make it more clear: if the Conservatives are bent on dismantling the gun registry, they must give Quebec the data so that it can maintain this tool that saves lives. Quebec's public safety minister, Robert Dutil, even came to Ottawa to remind the government that Quebecers helped pay for the registry and they are entitled to the data.

Now that the Conservatives can no longer hide behind the false pretense of protecting personal information, will they allow Quebec to retrieve the data from the registry it paid for, yes or no?

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of State (Small Business and Tourism), CPC): Mr. Speaker, during the election campaign we promised to destroy the gun registry. Guess what? The registry is made up of data, information. That is all there is to destroy. I do not know what else my colleague would like us to destroy. We will destroy what we promised to destroy because the data is wrong. The Auditor General said so on September 26, 2006.

In closing, I will quote the Auditor General:

Verification frequently determined that information on the weapon's action, make or serial number was wrong.

We will be destroying information that is wrong.

* * *

[English]

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of two ministers from Alberta, the Honourable Cal Dallas, Minister of Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations, and the Honourable Diana McQueen, Minister of Environment and Energy.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: I would also like to draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of the Honourable Craig Leonard, Minister of Energy for New Brunswick.

Business of the House

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of Dr. Gordon McBean, the internationally recognized meteorologist and climate change expert, recipient of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, and president-elect of the International Council for Science.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: I would also like to draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of Commissioner Brian Peddle, territorial commander for Canada and Bermuda of the Salvation Army.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

* * *

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to ask, for the first time as deputy House leader of the official opposition, the usual Thursday question.

To start, I would like to point out that, according to the second edition of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, the weekly statement is not supposed to serve as an opportunity to engage in negotiations or debate.

That is unfortunate, because just yesterday, the government saw fit to shut down debate on another bill, Bill C-13. I would very much have liked to remedy that situation by having a debate here in this House on the government's repeated undemocratic actions. However, I hesitate to do so because I do not want to be reprimanded by the Chair, so I will limit myself to saying that I believe that Canadians expect elected officials to debate the legislation before them and not to engage in procedural games.

[English]

Could the government House leader tell us and all Canadians what bills he is planning to subject to time allocation next week, other than the 644 pages of Bill C-13, and when the House will have its next supply day? Given the pattern of opposition days up to now, I think we can expect the next supply day on Thursday of next week, but please correct me if the government is changing its pattern for any reason.

• (1510)

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as we have said before, our government's top priority is the economy. Despite global economic challenges, nearly 600,000 new jobs have been created in Canada, 90% of them full-time. Through Canada's economic action plan our government has put forward focused and effective policies that have promoted job creation and economic growth in all sectors of the economy. That has been reflected in this week's successful jobs and economic growth week.

Our government will continue to focus on delivering important measures for Canada's economy. Thus, next week we will be delivering results on jobs week, and anticipate passing the next phase of our low tax plan for jobs and growth next week.

Beginning tomorrow, we will move forward on report stage for Bill C-18, Marketing Freedom for Grain Farmers Act. This important bill provides economic choice to western Canadian farmers. I understand that the hon. member for Winnipeg Centre has a number of amendments on the notice paper, but keep in mind that getting this bill passed would give farmers predictability for next year's growing season, which is an objective. I am looking forward to a productive, efficient and civil debate on the legislation, which will finally deliver freedom to western Canadian grain farmers after seven decades.

[Translation]

We will continue debate on Bill C-18 next Wednesday. I am hoping that we will be debating the bill's third reading on Wednesday, if the debate tomorrow turns out to be productive and efficient. In the last election, we committed to moving forward with Canada's economic action plan, a low tax plan for jobs and growth. Canadians gave our Conservative government a majority mandate to implement our plan.

On Monday, we will have the final day of debate on Bill C-13, the Keeping Canada's Economy and Jobs Growing Act, our primary bill in job creation and economic prosperity week. Bill C-13 implements important measures from our budget such as the small business tax credit and the extension of the accelerated capital cost allowance to make our manufacturers more competitive.

On Tuesday morning, we will continue debate on Bill C-7, the Senate Reform Act. The bill has already been debated on three days, so I hope that following Tuesday's debate the opposition will allow members to vote on this bill that will allow the Senate to reach its full potential as an accountable and democratic institution.

[English]

On Tuesday afternoon, we will continue debate on the opposition's motion to block Bill C-11, the copyright modernization act. The bill is another of our priority economic bills that the opposition is trying to prevent coming to a vote through what it calls a reasoned amendment.

Bill C-11 would create modern copyright laws to protect and create jobs, promote innovation, and attract new investment to Canada. This will be the fourth day that the bill has been debated. The time has come for members to have the chance to vote on this important economic bill. However, if the opposition continues in its efforts to delay and block the bill, we will again debate it on Thursday.

As is always the case, we will give priority to other important bills that may be reported back by committees. I refer especially to Bill C-10, as I understand that the justice and human rights committee is working hard, even as we speak, to complete its clause-by-clause consideration of the bill later today, I hope.

Speaker's Ruling

[Translation]

Finally, the next allotted day will be on Friday, November 25.

* * *

[English]

POINTS OF ORDER

TABLING OF DOCUMENT BY PRESIDENT OF THE TREASURY BOARD—
SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I am now ready to rule on the point of order raised by the member for Malpeque, on November 4, concerning the tabling of a document by the President of the Treasury Board.

I would like to thank the member for Malpeque for raising this matter, as well as the hon. Minister of State and Chief Government Whip, and the members for Richmond—Arthabaska and Winnipeg North for their comments.

[Translation]

The facts of this case are as follows. During oral questions on Friday, November 4, 2011, questions were posed which made reference to the resignation of a member of the Auditor General's internal audit committee in protest over the appointment of the new Auditor General. In one of these questions, the member for Bourassa named the individual concerned. Then, after question period, the President of the Treasury Board tabled a document that detailed a political donation this individual had made, referring to him by name twice.

[English]

In raising this point of order, the member for Malpeque condemned the minister's action, claiming that:

It is fear and intimidation. It can put the chill of fear into public servants and individuals in Canada donating to a political party that a minister will use that against them. By implication, it can be damaging to a person's reputation.

In response, the Chief Government Whip pointed out that since the document contained publicly available information, no confidentiality had been breached and no offence committed.

Before dealing with the substance of the point of order raised by the member for Malpeque, I would remind the House that ministers enjoy considerable latitude and may, at their discretion, table a wide range of documents in the House.

Standing Order 32(2) states:

- (1515)

[Translation]

A Minister of the Crown, or a Parliamentary Secretary acting on behalf of a Minister, may, in his or her place in the House, state that he or she proposes to lay upon the Table of the House, any report or other paper dealing with a matter coming within the administrative responsibilities of the government, and, thereupon, the same shall be deemed for all purposes to have been laid before the House.

[English]

Accordingly, it is clear that the President of the Treasury Board was acting within the established rules of the House in tabling a document for the information of members.

However, the information in the document tabled by the President of the Treasury Board, though publicly available, remains informa-

tion about an individual in his capacity as a private citizen. Therefore, the Chair would like to take this opportunity to remind all members of what my predecessors had to say on similar matters.

[Translation]

As Speaker Fraser outlined in a ruling on May 5, 1987, the freedom of speech members of the House enjoy is an “awesome and far-reaching privilege”, one that allows our “parliamentary system to operate free of any hindrance”. But he added, at page 5766 of the *Debates*, that:

[English]

Such a privilege confers grave responsibilities on those who are protected by it. By that I mean specifically the Hon. Members of this place.... All Hon. members are conscious of the care they must exercise in availing themselves of their absolute privilege of freedom of speech. That is why there are long-standing practices and traditions observed in this House to counter the potential for abuse.

[Translation]

This same caution is taken up in *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, Second Edition, at page 616, which states:

Members are discouraged from referring by name to persons who are not Members of Parliament and who do not enjoy parliamentary immunity, except in extraordinary circumstances when the national interest calls for this.

[English]

Cognizant of this fundamental principle and having acknowledged that there is no rule that prohibits mentioning individuals by name in the House, my predecessors have warned members of the potential risks of referring to members of the public in the House.

On April 24, 2007, on pages 85 and 86 of *Debates*, Speaker Milliken said:

It is incumbent upon all members to exercise fairness with respect to those who are not in a position to defend themselves. That being said, the Chair finds no grounds for further action in the present case.

On May 26, 1987, at page 6375 of *Debates*, Speaker Fraser went even further, stating:

It is not simply that such people could be slandered, with impunity, without any redress available to them, but that wrongdoing may be implied simply by making a personal reference.

On the same occasion he reminded the House of the immediacy with which remarks are widely communicated, stating:

[Translation]

...We are living in a day when anything said in this place is said right across the country and that is why I have said before and why I say again that care ought to be exercised, keeping in mind that the great privilege we do have ought not to be abused.

[English]

I need not elaborate on the fact that what was true in 1987 is even truer today.

It is these wise cautionary remarks that have prompted me to use this occasion to remind all hon. members to use great care when referring to or singling out an individual who does not have a voice here in this House and to avoid circumstances when, by such reference, an individual could have his or her reputation damaged without having the opportunity to respond.

I thank all hon. members for their attention.

*Business of Supply***GOVERNMENT ORDERS***[English]***BUSINESS OF SUPPLY**

OPPOSITION MOTION—ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

The House resumed consideration of the motion, and of the amendment.

Mr. David Wilks (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise in my place to address this important matter.

Before I go too far with what I have to say, I believe my hon. colleague's motion bears repeating. The hon. member for Toronto Centre moved:

That the House call on the Government of Canada to address on an urgent basis the needs of those First Nations communities whose members have no access to clean, running water in their homes; that action to address this disparity begin no later than spring 2012; and that the House further recognize that the absence of this basic requirement represents a continuing affront to our sense of justice and fairness as Canadians.

I thank the hon. member for putting forth this motion and raising this vitally important matter. Our government is strongly committed to the health and safety of all Canadians, whether they live on reserves or off, whether they are aboriginal or not. This remains a priority for all of us in the House.

I also want to inform all hon. members that I support this motion. That should come as no surprise to anyone. Like my hon. friend from Toronto Centre, I, too, believe the government needs to help ensure that all first nations communities have access to safe, clean and reliable drinking water. I, too, believe action should continue to be taken to ensure this kind of access. I, too, believe that the absence of safe, clean and reliable drinking water in first nations communities must be addressed.

Thankfully, our government recognizes the scope of the challenge raised in the motion. In fact, when the government assumed office five years ago, we made access to drinking water in first nations communities a national priority.

Since 2006, our government has made important and strategic infrastructure investments to support first nations in operating their water and waste water systems. We also launched a five-point plan of action for drinking water in first nations communities. In fact, our first budget contained important investments to start delivering concrete results from our plan. Moreover, by March 31, 2010, our government has invested approximately \$1.25 billion in first nations water and waste water infrastructure. That investment will total approximately \$2.5 billion by the end of the 2012-13 fiscal year.

Clearly, this is a government that is taking action, yet the job is not done. We continue to work with willing partners to find and implement concrete solutions to support access to safe drinking water. Our approach continues to be twofold. First, it involves determining with first nations the exact long-term infrastructure developments needed for each first nations community. Second, it involves putting in place an effective regulatory regime based on standards enshrined in law. This regulatory regime is meant to protect the integrity of our current and future infrastructure investments and safeguard access to safe drinking water in first nations communities.

This approach is based on the findings of several key reports. Let me take a few minutes to share some valuable insights from those reports and how these reports are helping our government deliver results and continue to make progress on this important issue.

To determine the exact long-term infrastructure development needed for each first nations community, we carried out a detailed national assessment of existing public and private water and waste systems operated by first nations communities across the country. This was a comprehensive, independent, third party evaluation.

● (1520)

In fact, we are the first government to ever commission a national assessment of this kind. The size and scope of the assessment was unprecedented. More than 4,000 on-reserve water, waste water, well and septic systems were rated against an extensive set of criteria. The rating is based on the overall system management risk. It looks at whether system design or mechanical features are up to modern standards, for example, or if operators are fully certified.

The report gives us a more complete picture of the challenges and opportunities ahead. The national assessment will help first nations and our government focus efforts on priority areas. It will point to solutions. It will help ensure the most effective and efficient use of taxpayer dollars.

In addition, our government has developed a response plan to address the findings and recommendations of the national assessment. This response focuses on three key areas of action: first, improving technologies and partnerships to ensure the best use of investments in infrastructure; second, enhancing capacity building and training; and third, putting in place legal, enforceable federal standards and protocols.

The assessment is also the government's direct response to a recent report of the Auditor General, who called on the government to do more to monitor the quality of drinking water on reserves. The Auditor General also called for a regulatory regime for on reserve drinking water and waste water systems. The Office of the Auditor General is not the only institution to make this recommendation.

In 2006, the government put together a panel of experts to identify workable options for a regulatory regime for on-reserve drinking water and waste water systems. The panel gathered testimony from representatives of first nations, provinces and territories, along with various experts in water and engineering. In its report, the panel identified three feasible regulatory options. The most sensible option was federal incorporation by reference of provincial and territorial laws, with adaptations required to meet the needs of first nations communities.

Business of Supply

The Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development echoed the panel's calls. The commissioner also made a series of recommendations. The most important was the call to create a federally regulatory regime for drinking water on reserve. Indeed, the commissioner stated flatly that until a regulatory regime compatible with that in the provinces was in place, the federal government could not ensure that first nations people living on reserves would have continued access to safe drinking water.

The Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development was not alone. A 2007 report of the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples came to essentially the same conclusion. After hearing from dozens of witnesses, committee members stated bluntly in the report: "Legislation to regulate water standards on reserve is required. No one, including this committee, argues differently".

The Senate committee report went on to make another key recommendation. The committee called on the government to undertake a comprehensive consultation process with first nations communities and organizations regarding legislative options, with a view to collaboratively developing such legislation.

That is exactly what we did. In response to this recommendation, the Government of Canada initiated an ongoing consultation process. To be precise, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada published a discussion paper and distributed it to interested parties in advance of a series of focused engagement sessions. Nearly 700 participants, including more than 500 representatives of first nations communities, were given the opportunity to provide their comments and suggestions on the proposal made by the panel experts and endorsed by the government.

• (1525)

This option is to incorporate, by reference, existing provincial and territorial regulations, with adaptation to meet the needs of first nations communities. No other viable option was put forward.

It is that opinion which forms the foundation of Bill S-11, the safe drinking water for first nations act. Why the law? This government understands that standards on their own are not enough. Standards must be supported by the force of law.

As a result of the dissolution of Parliament on March 26, 2011, however, Bill S-11 died in committee. I am pleased to report that the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development has been dialoguing with first nations on this issue and will be introducing water regulations which will be designed to give the same protection to first nations that other Canadians have. This type of legislation would make it possible for our government to work with first nations communities to develop enforceable federal regulations, regulations that would address the provisions of safe drinking water, effective treatment of waste water and to protect sources of drinking water in first nations communities. Indeed, our government continues to make access to safe drinking water and effective waste water treatment on reserves a national priority.

As my hon. friend's motion attests, the challenge remains. On Tuesday, Ecojustice, a national charitable organization dedicated to ensuring Canadians can enjoy a healthy environment, publicized its recent report on water quality in Canada. The group's report noted

the absence of drinking water legislation for first nations communities. I can assure the people at Ecojustice and all Canadians that we recognize the clear need for rigorous standards to uphold the quality of drinking water in first nations communities.

Our government is committed to introducing a federal law regarding first nations drinking water as soon as possible. I can assure Canadians that we have and continue to make important and strategic investments to improve and maintain water and waste water systems in first nations communities.

Our government is committed to working with willing partners to ensure first nations communities have access to safe drinking water. We will continue to move forward with our first nations and other partners to make waste water and water systems solutions a reality.

• (1530)

Mr. Greg Rickford (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate this whole discussion today. We are pleased to see the opposition members turning their attention to an issue that we have been spending a lot of time and action on in the past five years. More contemporaneously, I appreciate the member who has been working hard with us on the aboriginal affairs committee.

I have a technical question for him about risk levels as he mentioned in his speech. We have been doing the hard work here with respect to understanding this fully and completely. What do risk levels actually mean? If a community's water system is rated as high risk, does that necessarily mean that water in the community is unsafe to drink? This would be the first in a series of technical questions, but could he start by answering that?

Mr. David Wilks: Mr. Speaker, there are different designations of risk. There is high, medium and low. The system risk scores are an overall risk assessment of the management risk and not a measure of current water quality. It is the risk that the system would fail to produce safe water in the event of a problem. In most cases, systems identified as high risk are providing safe water for communities. The identification of a system as "high risk" helps the department direct resources where they are needed most and is a tool used to prevent problems before they arise.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, as this is the first time I have risen to ask a question in the debate today, I want to thank the Liberal Party of Canada for putting forward this important resolution to focus our attention on first nations drinking water quality and I thank the hon. member for Kootenay—Columbia for his presentation on the issue.

Business of Supply

I think we are all of one mind in the House and I would like to take partisanship out of it. As long as I can remember, parliamentarians of all stripes have been talking about the scandal that first nations in this country do not have drinkable water. It is a federal responsibility and yet it seems to bedevil the solution.

I would like to ask the hon. member for Kootenay—Columbia, can he suggest how, with new legislation, we could deliver the results we want if we do not back it up with billions more dollars?

•(1535)

Mr. David Wilks: Mr. Speaker, it has been recognized in the past that we have thrown billions and billions of dollars at this problem. Without a standard of law being put in place, we will not be able to ensure this works well. When we put the regulation in place, it will also be a matter of law to ensure that all systems are run properly, legally, and within the letter of the law.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. member a question regarding Attawapiskat, a community on which I saw a short film, a documentary.

Where does the hon. member rank this community on the scale of how underserved it is in terms of drinking water?

[*English*]

Mr. David Wilks: Mr. Speaker, I do not have the list that ranks any of the first nations from 1 to 571. They have all been assessed and given priority by this government. They will all be looked at. I can assure the member that the first nations that he is speaking of will be looked at when the measures are put in place.

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me pass on congratulations to my colleague, who I work with in committee, for a fine presentation.

I would ask my colleague to expand a little on the new report that is out and talk about what we have in terms of regulations concerning the water quality that must be adhered to, and how it will help pick up the pace in getting rid of major problems on reserves. Might he have a word or two on the new regulations for us?

Mr. David Wilks: Mr. Speaker, the regulations that will come into force will be equal to the provincial and territorial requirements in each of the said provinces and/or territories. By ensuring we have one collective system of regulation, we will ensure that we fall in line with the regulations of both the provinces and territories, and the federal government will ensure that occurs as well. It is very important that we have one standard that everyone understands is safe for all Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General's report on the living conditions in first nations communities says that, in the past five years, conditions have generally not improved and have even deteriorated. I am sure you are aware of this.

The deputy minister said that he had done everything he possibly could and that the government would have to give the department more tools if it wanted the department to do more. The hon. member

mentioned legislation on drinking water, which we are very happy about.

However, does the hon. member know whether the government intends to continue to introduce legislative tools to help the department?

[*English*]

Mr. David Wilks: Mr. Speaker, this government fully intends to continue down the road of ensuring that first nations have the best drinking water and waste water treatment centres available to them. We will work with first nations across Canada to ensure that occurs.

Mr. Greg Rickford: Mr. Speaker, just to move this discussion a bit further, whether we are talking about first nations or non-first nations communities, we have understood the importance of working on water treatment and waste water treatments. Obviously, the most important goal is residential, but there is also the commercial and industrial capacity. I know this member has been working hard on the committee around economic development.

I am wondering if he sees the economic development that we are looking at, specifically around land use modernization, or whether he sees that in part as a capacity exercise to ensure that first nations have the kind of infrastructure they will need to support a variety of activities, not just safe drinking water and waste water treatment.

•(1540)

Mr. David Wilks: Mr. Speaker, certainly we have heard from several people at committee with regard to economic development in first nations reserves. Speaking from the perspective of a former mayor in my community, I know the importance of waste water treatment plants. I know the cost of them. However, the fact of the matter is, to encourage business to come we must have good water and we must have good waste water treatment plants, specifically. If we do not have that business will not come.

Some first nations across this great land have recognized the importance of waste water systems and they are moving forward to ensure that they have the best that is available to them. I believe that if we can encourage that and continue to move that forward on all first nations reserves, we will have a great opportunity for all first nations to become economically sustainable within their first nations communities.

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I had the chance a couple of weeks ago to visit the Six Nations reserve near Brantford, Ontario and was astounded to learn that in southern Ontario, in a fairly built up urban landscape, there are 345 residences with no water whatsoever. They must truck water to their homes. This has been a problem for many years. There is already good drinking water on part of the reserve, so I am not sure what regulation is necessary to provide pipes.

Could the member explain to me, perhaps, how it is that the Government of Canada has neglected over many years the ability for these 350-odd residences to actually have drinking water in their homes?

Business of Supply

Mr. David Wilks: Mr. Speaker, we will ensure and work toward making sure those people at Six Nations get drinking water to those 325 homes that the member referred to. The infrastructure that is required to be placed into those homes has to be done through whatever means is required: putting pipes in the ground, ensuring they get to the homes, ensuring they are hooked up to the water system, and ensuring they are hooked up to the waste water system.

I am confident that this will occur very quickly. It is unfortunate that it has taken so long, but I can assure the House that our committee and the minister will ensure that it happens sooner than later.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, picture a black and white postcard of a toddler. His face is covered by a rash, his eyes are dark without shine, the headline is “Water is a human right” and the bottom caption reads “Do you have running water? I don’t...and I live in Canada, I need your help”.

This card is part of a campaign by the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs to raise awareness about the lack of safe and clean drinking water on many remote first nations reserves.

Now imagine walking down a path lined by trees to the lake on the Garden Hill First Nation. This is the walk a young boy must make every second day, just so he can break a hole in the ice to draw water for his family.

The former Auditor General Sheila Fraser reported that the government had failed time and again to take measures that would improve the quality of life for first nations. The basics of life, such as adequate housing, clean drinking water, child welfare, education, are persistently and dramatically substandard. As a result, Ms. Fraser said, in her parting words to Parliament:

I am profoundly disappointed to note...that despite federal action in response to our recommendations over the years, a disproportionate number of First Nations people still lack the most basic services that other Canadians take for granted...In a country as rich as Canada, this disparity is unacceptable.

She went on to explain that on first nations reserves conditions are getting worse instead of getting better, and recommended a complete overhaul of federal tools and increased participation of first nations.

Let me provide a specific example. The home of 82-year-old Mr. Taylor, who is a diabetic and requires dialysis every few days, has no bathroom and no running water. The hole in the ice is where he draws his water. The slop pail, a bucket covered by a garbage bag serves as his facilities in his upstairs bedroom. There is an outhouse, but it is inconvenient at minus 40°C.

Not being able to wash can have much more serious health consequences than diarrhea and skin infections. Lack of running water and therefore hand washing, a means of infection control is part of the reason northern Manitoba aboriginal communities were so badly impacted during the H1N1 pandemic.

Over the former Auditor General's 10-year term, her office produced 31 audit reports on aboriginal issues. Last year Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, itself, reported there was little or no progress in the well-being of first nations communities. A gap Ms. Fraser called unacceptable.

She explained that she actually thought it was quite tragic when there is a population in this country that does not have the sword of basic services that Canadians take for granted. Ms. Fraser concluded that too many first nations people still lack clean drinking water.

The federal government has jurisdiction over water on reserves, and provides support and funding to help these communities construct, upgrade and manage on reserve water systems.

Aside from federal policies, administrative guidelines and funding arrangements, there is no regulatory regime covering the quality and safety of drinking water in first nations communities, just as there is no legislation setting out responsibilities for educating children on reserves and no funding is assured.

Bill S-11, an act respecting the safety of drinking water on first nation lands was tabled in Parliament in May 2010, and attempted to address the regulatory void. Bill S-11 would have enabled the federal government to regulate drinking water on reserves, and incorporate and adapt relevant provincial legislation for the needs of first nations communities.

Bill S-11 was met with substantial resistance by first nations groups because it infringed on their jurisdiction. Furthermore, the 2010 Auditor General report warned that it could take years before regulations under Bill S-11 could be developed and fully implemented. The bill died when the federal election was called in the spring of 2011.

● (1545)

Water is essential for life. No living creature can survive without it. Water is a prerequisite for human health and well-being, as well as for the preservation of the environment. Water is the lifeblood of the land and of indigenous peoples who rely upon it.

First nations have, therefore, always viewed water as a sacred trust. From time immemorial, first nations have focused their existence on water; for example, their careful selection of community sites for transportation and harvest from waters. The amount of freshwater on earth is limited and its quality is under constant strain. Preserving the quality of freshwater is important for the drinking water supply, food production and recreational water use. Water quality can be compromised by infectious agents, radiological hazards and toxic chemicals.

Today, nearly two billion people live in water-stressed areas of the world and three billion have no water within a kilometre of their homes. Every eight seconds a child dies of water-borne disease, deaths that could be easily preventable with access to clean, safe water.

The lives of indigenous peoples are intricately tied to the land and the water. As those who live closest to the land and rely most heavily upon it, indigenous peoples strongly feel the effect of water depletion, pollution and other changes. Safe water supplies, hygienic sanitation and good water management are fundamental to global health. Safe water could annually prevent 1.4 million child deaths due to diarrhea, 860,000 child deaths due to malnutrition, 500,000 deaths due to malaria and 280,000 deaths due to drowning. Almost one-tenth of the global disease burden could be prevented by simply reducing risks of water-borne infectious diseases through increasing access to safe drinking water and improving sanitation, hygiene and water management.

There are many examples of water tragedies in Canada. For example, in 2000, seven people died in the community of Walkerton, Ontario, when their drinking water was contaminated with *E. coli*. However, it is aboriginal communities that have been disproportionately affected by the water crisis.

Despite repeated government pledges to ensure first nations have access to clean drinking water, their water is still often contaminated. The former auditor general, Sheila Fraser, reported that although the federal government had drafted legislation to ensure water safety, concrete changes were years away.

Most disturbing still is the fact that water quality testing is being undertaken only sporadically and key information is not being shared. More than half of reserves' drinking water systems are at risk. This past summer a national study of nearly 600 drinking water and waste water systems on first nations found that nearly three-quarters were classified at medium or high risk of not meeting safety standards. Specifically, over one-third were classified in the high-risk category.

The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development said that the report was identifying risk and stressed that the findings did not mean water was unfit to drink. I do not want to take a plane that has a high risk of not touching down, just as I do not want to drink water that has a high risk of not meeting safety standards. Thirty per cent of the high risk was from either the source water or the design. The rest was all due to operation, monitoring and reporting. I, therefore, would ask what concrete actions the government has taken to increase training, monitoring and reporting, and what moneys have been made available to pay for these urgent activities.

The world is waking up to the water and sanitation crisis. The lack of access to clean water is one of the greatest human rights violations in the world. We have the millennium development goals, with an aim to reduce, by half by 2015, the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. We are in the midst of the United Nations water for life decade, a decade of action to promote efforts to fulfill international commitments made on water and water-related issues by 2015.

● (1550)

When will the government address the water and sanitation crisis in our own country? Specifically, how will the government raise awareness about the water crisis? Action starts with awareness. How will the government undertake meaningful consultation on matters affecting first nations rights with respect to water and waste water?

Business of Supply

How will the government consult and work with first nations to address the resource gap? Will the government provide adequate financial resources to regions to conduct a thorough impact analysis to determine the financial, policy development and technical needs for each region?

In 2006, the expert panel on safe drinking water for first nations found that the federal government had never provided adequate funding to first nations to ensure that water quality standards on reserves could improve.

I want to make it very clear that our party will not support legislation on safe drinking water that is introduced without an implementation plan for additional resourcing that fully addresses the deficiencies identified in the national assessment of first nations water and waste water systems.

The government must collaborate with first nations and obtain their free, prior and informed consent on the range of regulatory options regarding safe drinking water identified by the expert panel on drinking water for first nations before the reintroduction of legislation.

The United Nations has recognized water and sanitation as a human right. On July 28, 2010, the United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly agreed to a resolution declaring human right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation. The resolution had 122 countries vote in its favour, while 41 countries, including Canada, abstained.

At the very time of the resolution, more than 100 boil water advisories were in effect on reserves and, for another 49 first nations communities, boiling water did not make the water safe enough for consumption. As of July 2011, there were 126 first nations communities across Canada under a drinking water advisory, an increase from 106 communities in 2008. As of October 31, 2011, there were 124 first nations communities across Canada under a drinking water advisory.

The MKO grand chief, David Harper, clearly told a Senate committee in February 2011 that the lack of running water in more than 1,000 homes in northern Manitoba was a violation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. He explained that his people were living in third world conditions, that families in the Island Lake region of Manitoba had less water every day than people in refugee camps.

People in the Island Lake region survive on just 10 litres per day, usually carried by family members in pails from local water pipes. Additional water comes untreated from lakes and rivers that have tested positive for contamination, including *E. coli*.

Business of Supply

Just this week, Ecojustice confirmed earlier findings, namely, “although billions have been spent and new legislation has been proposed, water quality in first nations communities is still far below that of off reserve communities and it shows few signs of improving”. Specifically, Ecojustice issued a report card on water and its lowest mark was awarded to the federal government, in part for the local improvement in water quality in first nations communities.

Global assessments indicate that the annual cost of not addressing water and sanitation amounts to 1.8 million deaths, health care costs of \$7 billion U.S. to health institutions, \$340 million U.S. to individual households and an opportunity cost of time lost in illness and care of \$63 billion U.S.

● (1555)

For a number of decades, water and sanitation issues were considered synonymous with disease and poverty. Inadequate water supplies, unsafe water resources, poor water management and inequitable access translated into time loss, financial cost, a burden of disease and high health care costs.

Over the past 15 years, this thinking has considerably changed. Water and sanitation issues are now considered an engine for development. Universal access to improved water supply, safe water resources and water resource management all have the potential to contribute to time and financial savings, better health and averted disease costs, and economically productive populations.

As discussed earlier, infectious water-related diseases are a major cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide. It is important to remember that newly recognized pathogens and new strains of established pathogens are being discovered and present additional challenges to both the water and public health sectors. For example, between 1972 and 1999, 35 new agents of disease were discovered and many more have re-emerged. Some of these pathogens may be transmitted by water.

Canada should be aggressively pursuing new ways to protect public health by reducing contaminants in the drinking water for all Canadians by protecting drinking water resources, modernizing the tools available to communities to meet their clean water requirements and providing affordable clean water services in rural communities.

It is time for the Government of Canada to implement a comprehensive national water strategy that upgrades national drinking water standards. In April 2008, the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* reported that there were 1,766 boil water advisories currently in place in Canadian municipalities, not including first nations communities.

Of the roughly 90,000 houses on reserves in 2008, approximately 2,100 homes had no water service and 4,700 had no sewage service.

Advisories are intended to be a precautionary measure in the public health tool kit. However, given the fact that some have been in place for at least five years, they are apparently being used as a band-aid solution.

As part of a national strategy for water, the government might consider the urgent need for infrastructure investment, committed

federal funding for municipalities and first nations communities to upgrade public water utilities, protection and preservation of water for all forms of life and for future generations, and federal backstop legislation to keep water in its basins and effectively ban bulk water exports.

Clean water is one of life's most basic needs and, therefore, it is unthinkable that communities are told to manage without it. The fact that over 100 first nations communities cannot drink their water is a national disgrace. One chief asked, “I wonder how different the response would have been if the residents of Toronto were without access to water?”.

I will finish by asking whether hon. members worry about the safety of their drinking water.

It is time that everyone in this chamber joined with first nations in demanding accountability and the right to safe drinking water. Moreover, it is time that the federal government be held accountable for its poor water protection grade.

● (1600)

Hon. Lynne Yelich (Minister of State (Western Economic Diversification), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a correction to the member's statements about not having a strategy and not giving attention to water and waste water.

Between 2006-07 and 2012-13 the government allocated over \$2.5 billion in water and waste water infrastructure in first nations communities: through the economic action plan, \$187.7 million for water and waste water projects across Canada; with those funds in Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada invested in 23 water and waste water projects.

I could go on. I could go to the best-based funding. Every government currently invests approximately \$422 million annually to support ongoing projects such as roads, bridges, electrification, infrastructure in first nations communities and about \$290 million for on-reserve housing needs.

We have invested in education, in housing and also in economic development because the first nations have asked for the creation of an economy in which they can participate. Since 2006, our government has done a lot.

Has the member any record of what was done before 2006 to set the record straight, given that she goes on about how many years first nations communities have been in such dire straits? Our government has paid attention to that and has made huge investments.

Business of Supply

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Speaker, there was no need for a correction. This is about getting results.

While \$330 million in the 2008 budget was allocated to safe drinking water in First Nations communities over two years, the current government has backed away from the Kelowna Accord that dedicated \$5.1 billion to improving the socio-economic conditions and access to water for Aboriginal people. Although the Accord would not have closed the gap between the standard of living for First Nations and non-Aboriginals in Canada, it was a sign of progress. "The Kelowna Accord was not the whole solution, but it was an incredibly important first step in implementing a comprehensive plan that would lead to a lasting solution," said National Grand Chief Phil Fontaine in addressing the Senate Standing". It was reached in November 2005 by the Government of Canada, provincial Premiers and Aboriginal leaders. Committee on Aboriginal Peoples.

• (1605)

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. friend for her passion and compassion on this issue.

We can all point fingers and talk about what was done in the past and ask if we are doing enough right now, but in my riding of Sudbury, many times the Canadian Red Cross has come to support the folks from Kashechewan who have been evacuated. Too many times we have seen Aboriginal people from the north come to our communities, being pulled from their homes because they cannot find water to drink. That is appalling in this day and age.

To address this issue we need to stop finger-pointing. Let us get to work and end this, because there is no reason that people in Canada should go without drinking water.

Could the hon. member comment on that?

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is absolutely right, this is what today is about, that we bring attention and that we work to get 100% of people living on first nations reserves the water and waste water treatment the rest of Canada has.

Nursing stations in Island Lake offer baths to medically vulnerable people who have no running water at home.

The physicians say, "We complain to each other about how much time we spend on this stuff. We would like to spend more time on education, heart disease, diabetes prevention, maternal child issues, but we cannot, because we have to take care of what needs attention right now".

Being unable to wash can have much more serious health consequences than diarrhea and skin infections, as residents of St. Theresa Point discovered when H1N1 flu exploded in the spring of 2009. "Lack of access to water and overcrowding facilitated the spread of these viruses", a Health Canada media spokeswoman acknowledged.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. member for Etobicoke North a question that has not been put forward today.

Does she think that part of the problem is that we do not regulate safe drinking water for Canadians? All of our drinking water

standards are guidelines, so when the federal government fails to provide safe drinking water it is not breaking any law.

Similarly, when the Newfoundland government hid from Newfoundland and Labrador residents that trihalomethane, a cancer-causing substance, had contaminated local drinking water, it was not breaking any law.

Do we need to take a different look at the way Canada regulates drinking water overall, without taking anything away from the fact that the worst situation is in first nations communities?

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Speaker, it is time for the government to implement a comprehensive national water strategy as well as upgrade our national drinking water standards.

As part of that national water strategy, I see the urgent need for infrastructure investment, committed federal funding for municipalities and first nations communities to upgrade public water utilities, protection and preservation of water for all forms of life and future generations as well as federal backstop legislation to keep water in its basin and effectively ban bulk water exports.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to comment on the member for Etobicoke North's reference to the national assessment report on risk.

Two-thirds of the risks associated with first nations water facilities actually relate to their capacity and the challenges that first nations have in training qualified water plant operators.

Since 2006, the number of certified operators has increased from 375 to 775 in 2011. Therefore, rather than support the Liberal record of inaction, will the member not support the legal standards in place?

An hon. member: She doesn't have the answer.

• (1610)

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I am trying to understand what the question was actually. Because I found it difficult to follow, I will raise a health issue.

I will bring this back to what this discussion is supposed to be focused on and talk about baby Jacob. He is covered in crust and sores that look painful. The nurses are not certain what his skin condition is, eczema perhaps, but they have told his mom that the best way to help this child's skin heal is to keep him clean all the time.

This is a tall order. His mother has to haul water from one of the town's outdoor taps. She only has one pail. It is a 38 litre pail for five family members, which works out to about 8 litres of clean water per person each day in a community where everything is covered in a thick layer of mud from unpaved roads. That is half the amount of water the family would likely be given by international aid agencies if the situation were recognized as a health emergency.

Business of Supply

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I spent a day recently at a reserve in southern Ontario, which amazingly has for decades not had clean water for many of its residents. Those decades span federal governments of all stripes, except the NDP, yet there has been no pipes run. Somebody needs to run pipes and there is no action. Regulations will not fix it. Talking about it will not fix it.

I also discovered that my hon. colleague's riding is the subject of a land claim by these same people at the Six Nation. I do not know if she is aware of that.

Could she comment on the need, not for regulation and not for talk, to actually send somebody with bulldozers and pipes and put water in the ground.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Speaker, we were there a few weeks ago and I am very aware of the issue.

I work very closely with first nations. I will again stress the health issue here.

Ruth Wood is 64. She lugs a latrine pail up a hill to the outhouse to dump it because her husband is in a wheelchair after neck surgery and cannot walk to the privy. He worries that they will be forced out of their home when his wife can no longer handle the buckets.

In winter, Nicole Mason, who is 14, and her little brother Andy, who is 6, haul drinking water home in St. Theresa Point on a plastic sled through driving snow.

Bernard Flett can barely walk, so one of his daughters sometimes hauls two buckets at a time with a wooden yolk over her shoulders.

Today is about bringing everyone together to take action on a national crisis in the country.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with my colleague from Edmonton—Strathcona.

I stand here proud to represent the people of northern Manitoba, recognizing that we have incredible diversity in our part of the country and, with it, tremendous opportunity as well with the wealth of human resource in our region. We are also one of the youngest regions in Canada and northern Manitoba. Many young people looking ahead at what they hope will be a bright future are part of communities that are looking down the line to see how they can make our part of the country a better place in which to live.

However, along with our tremendous opportunity and that wealth of knowledge and incredible diversity, there are also some extreme challenges that people in northern Manitoba face. Perhaps the most acute of these challenges exists on some of the northern remote first nations that I have the honour to represent.

I would like to point particularly to the reality faced by the Island Lake region's four first nations, St. Theresa Point, Garden Hill, Wasagamack and Red Sucker Lake, communities that are quickly growing. Many of the people who live in these communities are young people looking ahead at a reality that is very different from the reality most Canadians realize. I would argue that reality, as more Canadians have come to know of it today, is one that shocks many people because it is so far from not just the kind of services

Canadians have, but the kind of daily actions that we expect any Canadian to go through.

The more than 40% of the 1,880 first nations homes in Canada that still do not have water service are located in these four Island Lake first nations. More than 800 homes in the Island Lake first nations are without water service. As many people in the House know, homes are often overcrowded, leaving multiple generations to live with the social turmoil that is involved with such a reality. What exacerbates that is the fact that so many of these houses do not have running water.

A couple of years ago, it was important for me to stand, along with people in the NDP, and call for urgent action when it came to the H1N1 pandemic that hit the Island Lake first nations disproportionately. Many people wonder why that was the case, but we know that the correlation between influenza, viruses and illnesses of all kinds and no running water is a very strong one. Instead of a long-term plan, the government focused the discussion around hand sanitizers. Even when we asked for a proper response when it came to medical professionals, the government took a long time to be there.

The story of the Island Lake first nations is one that is more extreme than others. The other communities I represent, such as Shamattawa, Hollow Water, Bloodvein and Marcel Colomb, which is working to build its first nation, also face extreme challenges in providing proper water services to their residents.

Simply put, the situation facing so many first nations in northern Manitoba and across Canada is unacceptable. First nations people across Canada face third-world living conditions, conditions that so many of us could not even imagine.

I think of the people I visited in communities across my constituency and communities in Island Lake, where I have the chance to drive on the ice roads to go and visit every year, if not more than once a year. I remember in the last election, following extreme pressure from both the media and the leadership in the first nations in Island Lake, the response given to them by the Ministry of Indian Affairs was a slop pail for every home. In fact, I took a picture with a slop pail and for many people it was a mix of shame, disgust and perhaps awe, trying to understand what the government meant to say on how little it thought of the reality faced by people in Island Lake.

Today, I am pleased to hear the government is supporting the motion in front of us and is committing to action. I am eager to know that this action is not around sending a new round of slop pails or water tubs, but that it looks at long-term investment in these communities.

● (1615)

I am also concerned that the reality today is not just one that has been developed over the last five years. Previous Liberal governments have committed to the unacceptable reality that so many first nations face in northern Manitoba, through the starving of capital funds to first nations due to the 2% cap, and through the refusal to understand that first nations people, under Liberal and current Conservative governments, deserve the dignity that we all deserve as Canadians.

Business of Supply

Today, I am proud to stand with my colleagues in the NDP to call for a real action plan that supports the needs of first nations and changes this unacceptable reality that they face. I would like to call for a visionary approach, recognizing that it is not just about clean water, housing and education, but it is about understanding that first nations people in Canada fall well below their non-aboriginal counterparts when it comes to quality of life.

It shows a structural inability of government after government to deal with first nations people on an equal level, to recognize the self-governing capacity of first nations. We must work with them in partnership and recognize that, in the case of Manitoba and first nations across the country, we must respect their treaty rights. In doing so, we commit to changing that reality together. As first nations face third world conditions, it is something that all Canadians face.

We must recognize that making such change brings tremendous opportunity to our country. If first nations young people have proper housing conditions, water conditions and education, they will be able to contribute to Canadian society like anyone else. Our economy will benefit, our social fabric will benefit and we will all benefit.

As the member of Parliament for Churchill, I am asking on behalf of so many first nations and as a proud New Democrat, for us to put an end to the piecemeal approaches or the public relations stunts. We need to work with first nations who have worked very hard, whose leadership and community members and organizations have worked very hard to put the issues on the table and to bring solutions forward. These solutions are based on partnering with other jurisdictions, such as provincial governments and municipal actors, to discuss economic development. At the end of the day, though, the Government of Canada has a fiduciary obligation to first nations. The third world conditions that exist on first nations in Canada today are a shame to the Government of Canada and a shame to all of us.

I am asking today that we put aside the debates about who has done what. We are far off the mark in ensuring that first nations and aboriginal people in Canada have the same dignity that we all deserve, that we share with them in building a vision that looks at equality, fairness, dignity and a new way of thinking of the kind of Canada that we want: a Canada where we enjoy the equality, but recognize the rights of the first peoples of our country. No one in Canada today should live the reality that so many first nations experience and we all, as Canadians, first nations, Métis and Inuit deserve dignity in a Canada of 2011 and moving forward.

• (1620)

Mr. Greg Rickford (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member for Churchill and I share a vast border together and communities in her riding and mine are long-standing families. She and her father have done some work on this file and others for her communities. I have had an opportunity to be the nurse in charge at St. Theresa Point and nurse in Cross Lake and Norway House, a beautiful part of the country. There are certainly some challenges there.

With respect to Island Lake, this government has taken immediate measures that resulted from meetings with department officials last year. Septic trucks, water trucks and other equipment were brought in over the winter roads and a plan was put in place to conduct an assessment on a house-to-house basis of community water and waste water needs.

In terms of her comments with respect to a piecemeal approach, that was an urgent intervention. Would she not agree that the three critical components to a good comprehensive plan would be capacity development, certifications to report, monitor and maintain those facilities, infrastructure needs, and legislation, and that this triumvirate forms the basis for a good strategy moving forward?

Ms. Niki Ashton: Mr. Speaker, I respect my colleague's work in the critical area of health care services in northern Manitoba and across northern Ontario.

I am encouraged to see the attention to dealing with the reality of so many first nations. However, many promises have been made. Recent promises to the Island Lake region resulted in people getting new slop pails and water containers. The parameters that we are setting in our policies are not translating to real change on the ground. That is why when I hear the minister committing to a plan, I know the Island Lake first nations and people across northern Manitoba are keen to see how this will make a tangible difference in ensuring that there is clean running water in their homes and communities.

• (1625)

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleague for her great work on this subject and the work she does for her constituents.

This is an issue for those of us who live in northern communities. I am from an urban centre in northern Ontario, but I see the effect among those who come from the northern communities into Sudbury when they have been evacuated because their drinking water supply has been contaminated by solid waste treatment. Money has been spent on evacuation, which is necessary. It is sad that we still live in a day and age when those who live in rural communities in the north, especially aboriginal communities, are going without water. It is a necessity of life.

I would like to hear what my hon. colleague has to say in relation to what we can do right now to ensure that we are addressing this catastrophe.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Mr. Speaker, I would like to note the work done by my colleague from Sudbury in ensuring that northern Canadians of all backgrounds have the kind of fairness that they deserve, whether it is in terms of health, education or the economy.

The point he made was about putting emphasis on right now, which is the critical piece. This is an urgent situation. We know the health impact as a result of the lack of clean running water. We know the tremendous social and even psychological impacts that people face while living in such undignified conditions. Let us ensure that the plan being put forward by the government echoes the plans that are being asked for by first nations.

Business of Supply

First nations have done extensive work. They have pointed to opportunities for partnerships and information that needs to be pursued. Let us listen to them, work in partnership with them and make sure that the third world living conditions that first nations experience today are no more.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): 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 Saint-Jean, The Economy; the hon. member for Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Canada Post; the hon. member for Cape Breton—Canso, The Environment.

[*English*]

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Churchill for sharing her time with me.

I support the motion by the hon. member for Toronto Centre but on condition, as was complied with and consented to, of a very critical amendment to that motion. The critical amendment calls for immediate action on an issue that has gone on far too long in this country. We are happy to support this motion subject to the amendment also passing that immediate, urgent action be taken to address the critical situation with respect to access to drinking water for our first nations people in Canada.

The dire situation faced by far too many aboriginal communities deserved urgent, substantial action and investment in decades past by former Conservative and Liberal governments. Today is an opportunity for every elected member in the House to support the call for immediate action and investment, and I emphasize action and investment.

First nations people grow tired of hearing the same response by the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs every day in the House, that the government is spending a lot of money. The government is spending a lot of money on a lot of things, but it is not addressing the urgent needs of first nations women, children, elders and families for potable water for safe washing and drinking. They deserve it now, not next week, not next month, not next year, not in the next decade.

National Chief Shawn Atleo testified on Bill S-11, the proposed safe drinking water act for first nations tabled by the government in the Senate, not in the House, during the last Parliament. That bill, by the way, was roundly spoken against by every first nation organization and leader who testified. We are still waiting for the long-promised revised and improved law to come forward.

Chief Atleo said that federal action to provide safe drinking water services to all first nations is a clear priority for the first nations he represents. It does not yet appear to be a priority for the Conservative government.

I want members to hear me clearly. It is not an adequate response if the measures, including promised but not yet forthcoming laws, taken are not based on direct consultation with first nations and accommodation of their stated needs, interests and recommendations.

Chief Atleo advised that three distinct and inseparable actions must be taken to ensure sustainable supply of safe drinking water to first nations communities. Those include first, clear assurance of the necessary resources to ensure that first nations can comply with any future drinking water standards. Second, a genuine process of consultation with first nations in the development of the rules is needed. Chief Atleo gave examples of where in the past there had been genuine and constructive dialogue on legislation. Regrettably he advised, that has not yet occurred in this matter.

His third action is the recognition that no first nation will agree to any law that abrogates or derogates aboriginal and treaty rights. That was the most strident objection voiced by all first nations witnesses testifying to the law put forward by the government in the last Parliament.

Those views were echoed at other forums sponsored by the federal government. The former Indian affairs department, now Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, appointed an expert panel on safe drinking water for first nations. Yet again another review, another study. It reported in 2006. It recommended exactly what Chief Atleo called for.

We need to provide legislative protections for first nations communities in the same way that those protections are accorded to all other communities in this country. How does that happen, because the government in its wisdom, like all past Liberal and Conservative governments, has refused to enact binding, legal, safe drinking water standards?

• (1630)

Therefore, when we deal with first nation peoples who are supposed to be protected by this national government, we see that the government has failed to provide those same standards to first nation peoples.

The expert panel recommended that yes, we need to have legislation provide a useful framework for that law and the number of options, but also said that the government must not move forward until it guarantees the resources and training are in place so those nations can comply with that law.

Then the Senate had yet another review before its aboriginal committee. In 2007, based on the testimony yet again by government and first nation leaders, it made exactly the same recommendations that were put forward by the national chief, and in fact by all the chiefs who had been testifying, and by the INAC expert panel.

Thus the duty to consult and accommodate is very important, and the first nations are calling upon the government to take that seriously. That duty was upheld by the supreme Court of Canada in a very important case brought by a first nation in my province, the Mikisew Cree First Nation. That decision was very clear: before the federal government makes any decision on any policy or law, or on any matter affecting the resources, interests or people of first nations, it has an overriding constitutional obligation to consult, accommodate and respond.

Business of Supply

It is not good enough that the government keeps reminding first nations how much money it spent, or to be patient because safe drinking water laws are coming soon. It needs to genuinely commit the budget now.

In a moment, I will reveal what the budget number is. How do I know the number? It is because the government commissioned an engineering group to do the work of identifying that exact figure.

If the first nations suffering under continuing boiled water advisories cannot hold out hope that the government is going to respond to all of those previous reviews, they might heed the advice of the former Auditor General, Sheila Fraser. In her final audit report this year, she identified first nation drinking water as among the critical outstanding matters warranting priority federal action. She admitted that the government had taken some action, but decried the lack of any real progress in improving the lives and well-being of people living on reserves. She has said that despite her office producing over the past decade "...no fewer than 31 audit reports on aboriginal issues...too many First Nations people still lack what most other Canadians take for granted".

She called for major structural reforms, including a legislated base for programs, including safe drinking water, and "commensurate statutory funding". Those are very important words, "commensurate statutory funding".

What she pointed out with examples from education was that in the case of first nation children, they do not have a statutory right to ensure that governments issue money on a regular basis to meet their educational needs or, in this case, their safe drinking water needs. No. First of all, the first nation has to agree that it will build a treatment plant or build the piping or fix the piping or do some training. Then, on that condition, the government will eventually sign a contribution agreement and eventually the first nation will receive some money, but only for a year. Then it starts all over again.

She also called for support for local service delivery by first nations. Again, the Auditor General was listening to first nations. Will the government listen to the first nations?

Let us put a reality fix on the scale of the problem. As I mentioned, the engineering report commissioned by the government, issued this year, identified a cost of an additional \$3.5 billion simply to bring first nation water supplies up to standards legally required for other Canadian communities. It may be noted that for Alberta alone, the cost is \$162 million.

I want to add that it is not enough just to deal with the end of the pipe. As members may be aware, or those who were in the last Parliament or have taken the time to take a look at what occurred in the last Parliament, a number of us issued a report based on a review of the impact of the oil sands on water. In that report, it was very clear that the federal government was dropping its responsibilities on the protection of source water.

That is absolutely critical. The best way to reduce the costs for first nations of treating their water is to ensure that the source water is clean.

A few days ago, I mentioned the high levels of carbon in the source water of the Fort McKay community. If they had a safer

source of water, they could reduce the harm to their community by not having to add more chlorine to their water.

• (1635)

In closing, first nations deserve a law to ensure their right to safe drinking water, they deserve the resources to move on that immediately, they deserve respect for their aboriginal and treaty rights, and they deserve real consultation in this matter.

Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the issue of funding for safe drinking water has come up repeatedly in many speeches. However, numerous reports, including some by the previous Auditor General just cited by the member opposite, state that that there are not yet clear standards for accountabilities for investment, and that water infrastructure itself sometimes faces a shortened life cycle because these facilities are not governed by the sustainable infrastructure and the accountability that should go with sustainable infrastructure.

I will read what we take to be a reasonable statement by the member opposite: "The Auditor General is very clear. Throwing money at the problem is not enough. You need structural reform. Unlike the rest of Canadians who actually have laws providing us... safe drinking water, none of that exists for First Nations peoples, and they're calling for very reasonable recommendations to move on restructuring how these services give some legal certainty...."

That is a statement made in June by member for Edmonton—Strathcona. I would like to know if she stands by that statement today.

• (1640)

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I absolutely do. If the member took the time to read the full Auditor General's report, he would understand what she was talking about.

The Auditor General called for structural reform in government. Why did she call for that? It was so that the federal departments and officials could be held accountable by the first nations for the responsibilities they have to provide safe drinking water.

Absolutely, I stand by that. I have the highest respect for the former Auditor General, and she was bang on.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am sure that, like me, my colleague from Edmonton—Strathcona is insulted to hear the Conservatives say that they have done a lot of work since 2006, when the Auditor General's report is clear. There has been virtually no improvement in the past five years, and things have even gotten worse in some cases, for example with education and adequate housing.

Business of Supply

I would like my colleague to talk to us a bit about what the Auditor General's report said regarding the suggestions, which go beyond legislation.

[English]

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, indeed, the Auditor General's final report did go much further than just the need for the government to finally give due attention to safe drinking water for aboriginal communities. She also raised the plight of inequitable funding going to first nations children compared to other children.

One of the things I wish the hon. member for Toronto Centre would have referenced specifically when he tabled his motion is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. That would have reminded every member of the House that the government of the day signed on and assented to that United Nations declaration. By doing so, it undertook to commit to remove immediately all discrimination against aboriginal peoples in Canada. That does not just fall within safe drinking water, but within housing, infrastructure and equal access to economic opportunities.

Mr. Greg Rickford (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the hon. member's speech today and the opportunity to work with her in committee on some important things.

The member is co-author of a book entitled, *A Legal Guide to Aboriginal Drinking Water*, which I have had a chance to review and concur with on many fronts. In this book, the member and her co-author assert that legally binding standards for safe drinking water for first nations communities are long overdue. She alludes to a piece of legislation that died on the order paper.

I wonder if the member is prepared to work with the government and first nations to fill the legal gap that she outlined in her book and whether she believes that those legally binding standards are a matter of the highest importance in this process.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I am glad that the hon. parliamentary secretary is reading the book. I was happy to give him a copy.

Indeed, I am looking forward to continuing to work with first nations and the government. That is why I ran for election originally and was elected in 2008. I have been waiting for the opportunity to work hand in glove with the government.

Unfortunately, the government has chosen, in its wisdom, to table the bill in the Senate, and so I have not been afforded that opportunity as yet. I am looking forward to the opportunity of recommending witnesses to come forward. I would bring to the member's attention that I appreciate the invitation from 47 chiefs in Alberta to meet with them urgently to review their concerns with the legislation the government previously tabled.

• (1645)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor. I want to take this moment to thank him, a member of another party, for quite magnanimously and

generously making it possible for the Green Party to enter into the debate on this important opposition day motion.

We are concerned, as are all parties in the House, about the ongoing scandal of the failure of the federal government to ensure our fiduciary, legal and constitutionally required obligation to provide safe, clean drinking water to every person living within a first nations community. This is so fundamental, so constitutionally enshrined and so clearly something that we all share on all sides of the House, it is not only our legal obligation but also our moral obligation.

It is an ongoing scandal that disturbs the conscience of all Canadians when they realize that third world drinking water conditions exist right across this great and wealthy country, but in first nations communities almost exclusively.

I want to try to address the problem and propose some solutions as we discuss this issue in as non-partisan a fashion as possible

We recognize that the statistics on this issue are shameful. Only 27% of first nations enjoy drinking water that could be considered safe; 39% of drinking water supplies are judged to be of high risk; and 34% are judged to be of moderate risk. The first nations themselves have questioned these statistics collected by our Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, which says these are collected in a bit of an arbitrary fashion but are the statistics we have.

In one month alone, in May of this year, there were 223 advisories and warnings in first nations communities, a statistic discovered by Canadian Press through access to information.

We recognize that the statistics, while dreadful, continue in the face of various governments. There is no question that previous Liberal governments and this Conservative government have made announcements, provided funding, and have said they would deal with this issue. Yet it remains an ongoing scandal.

I remember how shocked I was when a friend of mine who worked in a first nations community, Burnt Church, New Brunswick, described to me how the local hospital had to have water trucked in. That is how deeply we are failing first nations communities, that even a local hospital had to rely on trucking in bottled water because safe drinking water supplies were just not available.

What are the issues here? Some of them were discussed in a brief exchange between the hon. parliamentary secretary and the member for Edmonton—Strathcona. The member for Edmonton—Strathcona does have a long history on this issue, having authored a book on first nations governance around water issues.

Business of Supply

Clearly we have to start finding a solution with fundamental respect for the rights, jurisdiction and responsibilities of first nations themselves. In the words of Grand Chief Shawn Atleo of the Assembly of First Nations, this was where the previous government legislation, which started in the Senate, Bill S-11, was so fatally flawed. It did not start with engagement that respected the rights and jurisdiction of first nations. We have to start with that.

The government has said in the past that it would enter into consultations with first nations to develop a water governance model that would work. To date we know there have been 13 engagement sessions that took place in 2009. That does not constitute the kind of full engagement with first nations governments that is required to really understand how we develop shared jurisdiction in this area, with a water governance model that will actually work. How do we develop that? It starts with talking to first nations about a shared model.

Once we respect first nations rights and jurisdiction, we then have to look at what they are saying about the problem. Grand Chief Shawn Atleo has said that there is a large capacity gap. In other words, we could impose regulations on first nations communities, but we have not addressed important holistic issues, respecting traditional knowledge, for example, attempting to support first nations in their communities through respect and government to government negotiations in order to create first nations water governance models that would actually work and are supported by enhanced capacity.

• (1650)

It is not all pipes that we need. It is more than that. It has to be holistic. We need to address the requirements in first nations communities.

Yes, we do need more money. That is going to be essential to providing any framework that works. We need water treatment systems. We need to develop those systems that make sense in the context of first nations communities, often in remote areas.

We need to stop polluting first nations water. This is pretty fundamental, but if someone lives downstream from a large pulp and paper mill that is not watching its effluent, if someone is downstream from the Athabasca tar sands, downstream from areas of pollution, or in the case of first nations communities where cranes lived all around and were surrounded by greater mercury contamination from the large hydro plants, there are going to be specific water pollution problems that are not simply bacteriological. It will not simply be dealt with through dealing with contamination in a bacteriological sense.

This holistic view starts with protecting water at source, ensuring there is capacity in first nations communities and ensuring we are respecting the rights and jurisdictions of first nations communities.

I am not trying to cast blame in any way here at all across party lines. It is important that on this issue, for once, we act in a non-partisan fashion that recognizes that, in a serial sense, there has been a serial failure here that is not something we can peg on one government or another.

It is something that speaks to who we are as a nation, that we come together, that we respect the primary responsibility that this is a

governance issue where we are on somebody else's territory. In a very real sense, anywhere in Canada we are on somebody else's territory. However, specifically in first nations communities, those rights and responsibilities of jurisdiction cannot be abridged, cannot be ignored, cannot be conveniently treated as non-issues because we have decided we are going to put a particular type of water plant in and we are going to tell people how it is going to work.

We have had enough failures, as we know, with high tech water plants across Canada in non-indigenous communities that we should not be arrogant about this. The great failure of the Halifax water treatment plant comes to mind, after billions were spent. We need to approach this issue as a shared partnership to ensure safe drinking water for every first nations community.

Going forward from that, this day of debate and discussion in the House of Commons is an excellent start. We certainly have been admonished. We have been admonished by Sheila Fraser, as Auditor General, in her final statement to us as parliamentarians, that after years of filing reports pointing out the failure to deliver clean drinking water to first nations communities, she wonders if we can ever make any progress at all.

This is our moment. Let us not lose it. We are coming together. We agree on something. Let us work together on it.

My last thought goes to the question of drinking water in Canada overall. Now that we are addressing first nations drinking water in a non-partisan fashion across all parties in the House of Commons, can we not look at the larger question of how we regulate drinking water in general?

I may not be right about this, I just want to share this. I'm thinking out loud. Is there something wrong with the overarching framework of drinking water in Canada that we do not regulate the safety of drinking water in Canada? We regulate food safety. There have been various attempts in the Senate over the years to put forward a bill that would reclassify water as food, so that we would then regulate the safety of water.

We do not regulate the safety of water. We have federal government guidelines from Health Canada and when they are not being observed, there is no enforcement mechanism. Generally, enforcement for safe drinking water in Canada has been a process that involves media stories, headlines, and trying to get attention. Unless it is a desperate situation like Walkerton, sometimes drinking water standards, even in a non-first nations context, are not getting adequate attention.

Perhaps it is time that we address the need for a safe drinking water act that will reach all Canadian taps, all Canadian faucets, all Canadian homes. In doing that we will have created a federal framework within which the rights and responsibilities, and the appropriate jurisdictions of first nations can be respected as we augment the failures by providing significant resources to providing safe drinking water everywhere in this country, but particularly in that area of exclusive federal responsibility which we share with first nations on first nations reserves across Canada.

I am thankful for having the opportunity to speak to this. I look forward to questions.

Business of Supply

●(1655)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on the topic of consultation that the member opposite referred to, in the summer of 2006 the expert panel held a series of public hearings for first nations across Canada, hearing from over 110 presenters and receiving more than two dozen written submissions.

In April 2007 a joint workshop was held between federal officials and the Assembly of First Nations technical water expert group to engage technical experts on the government's proposed option, incorporation by reference, and allow the experts to identify issues and challenges that would need to be resolved in order to effectively implement this option.

From May to July 2008, INAC, Health Canada and Environment Canada met with regional first nations organizations, the Assembly of First Nations and provincial territorial officials to prepare for future engagement sessions on a legislative framework. First nations expressed support for continued discussions on the development of legislation and regulations.

From February through March of 2009 a series of engagement sessions were held with first nations communities, regional first nations organizations and provincial-territorial officials, and these sessions offered a forum for participants to suggest solutions and recommendations on how to best address the existing regulatory gap for drinking water and waste water in first nations communities.

In 2009-10 the federal government met with first nations chiefs and first nations organizers to discuss specific regional issues raised during the engagement sessions held from February to March 2009. During these sessions, key elements of the draft legislation were shared in deck format.

In the same spirit of co-operation that was afforded the member to share her time during this debate, would she be willing to co-operate with the government in helping—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, it is not an easy matter to conduct the kind of consultations that meet the standards of Supreme Court of Canada decisions, such as in Delgamuukw, Weyerhaeuser, Haida Gwaii First Nation, and challenges to consultations.

We can invite first nations to provide briefs and hold meetings, but if it has not started with a fundamental respect, and some of these meetings may have been well-intentioned and met the standard, the reality of consultations with first nations is that they are government to government. They are not merely a matter of taking briefs on board as if we are dealing with NGOs. The consultation mechanism must start with a sign-off with the Assembly of First Nations as the body that represents the chiefs and councils of first nations across Canada, and must be engaged in a respectful government to government relationship. That will bring better results.

In answer to the member's question, yes, I am more than happy to do anything I can to help. I think we should work together.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Giguère (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member who just spoke talked of fundamental respect. I would like to make an aside, a little comment meant for everyone here. Nearly 150 years ago, two founding peoples decided to create this country. A third people was deliberately left out of the discussion, left out of the creation of this country. And this colonialism still exists. We, the political representatives of the two founding peoples, are going to decide what right the third people has to water and what the quality of that water will be.

These discussions will go on and on as long as we do not accept the fundamental fact that the Indian Act is colonial and outdated. These discussions will take place as long as we refuse to recognize the first nations as one of the founding peoples. Two or three years from now, we will be talking about housing and education rights. That is the problem. The first nations have a basic right to be part of the discussion and to fundamental respect.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his comments. Generally, we agree, but the question of the role of the Indian Act concerns aboriginal people first and foremost. National Chief Atleo has said that there are major problems with the act. He wants to see changes made to it, but that is an issue for a broader dialogue than today's debate on the right to clean, safe water.

●(1700)

[English]

**Mr. Scott Simms (Bonaville—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleague from St. Paul's who has provided a great deal of leadership. I would also like to thank and congratulate the preceding speaker from Saanich—Gulf Islands, the leader of the Green Party, who did a fantastic job on her speech. It was a pleasure sharing the time with her.

I was just reading this morning about boil water advisories, which has been an ongoing issue in my home province of Newfoundland and Labrador. There are approximately 200 of them right now, which is a substantial amount for an island province and of course the mainland portion of Labrador. That is a quite a number for a province with a little bit over 500,000 people.

That gives us an idea of the situation we have and what we are dealing with, especially in some of the more remote and rural areas, and those that are of first nations are extremely vulnerable when it comes to this.

We have signed on to many agreements and we have had many aspirations that tell us that we should look at this as a human right for individuals who want clean drinking water and who have a right to receive it. Certainly, our government has the responsibility to live up to these standards, to meet with the right people and the community groups that are on the forefront of this issue.

Business of Supply

As my hon. colleague just pointed out, regarding the particular groups in this particular situation, we get the information from them, we go through the consultation processes, and then in the end we seem to fail to connect that bridge between the action items we decide we want to do. I know some cynics would say that usually happens in government. In many cases it happens.

Unfortunately, in this case and in many others, action does not happen soon enough, and because it does not happen soon enough the most vulnerable are the first ones to receive the worst part of this, which is not receiving clean drinking water.

I want to congratulate the member for Toronto Centre, the leader of our party for bringing this motion forward, as well as the member for St. Paul's.

I would like to get into this particular document first. I find that it is one that is pertinent and that creates an international standard that we have to live up to. I have read this before and I find that it is actually a fantastic document to read from. I will cite from article 21:

Indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including, inter alia, in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security.

States shall take effective measures and, where appropriate, special measures to ensure continuing improvement of their economic and social conditions. Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities.

Therein lies the responsibility of governance, not just this particular government but other governments. I know we have been lost in debate about whether this is an aspirational thing to do, or is something that we must do in the immediate term. Anything we sign on to has to have the right policies in place in order to turn these into action items and to make these goals into realities, and to reduce the number of communities across this country that do not need to boil their water just to receive the basic service of clean water, like many nations do.

We have experience in the past little while where we have signed on to a few treaties, and yet the action that follows has become futile at best. Unfortunately, it gets bogged down into a lot of the machinations of bureaucracy and the machinations of how we debate in this House, and how we are confrontational in the way we handle politics here in the House of Commons, which is extremely disappointing.

My colleague from Saanich—Gulf Islands touched on this just a short time ago, when asking about congeniality and how we could come to a common agreement. Nobody in this House would ever say, “Let's hold on. Let's just not do this right now. Let's put this down the list when it comes to providing clean drinking water”. Nobody would say that.

● (1705)

However, for some reason we start to debate the details of this and the narrative gets lost, the narrative being providing clean drinking water. Pardon the vernacular, but sometimes we need to collectively give our heads a shake in order to realize what the end result of this would be.

My niece, who is from Newfoundland and Labrador, is a school teacher who taught in Attawapiskat. When I went there to see her, I

was struck by a community that I thought was in need of so many of the basic services, such as housing, water, health care and education. Even though it was considered a remote community and although over time the conditions had become worse, I wondered how it had arrived at that point.

At what point should we say that the standards by which these people are living are not measuring up to the international agreements that we signed? How does that happen in a country like Canada when we have become the leader of the world, when we have become the country that everybody wants to become? Many international leaders have said that we need to bring Canada to the rest of the world. The problem with bringing Canada to the rest of the world is that it would bring this as well. It would bring forward the fact that we are making some mistakes.

We need to aspire to all the goals that are outlined within this particular agreement, but more important, we need to turn these into action.

I want to talk about some of the back and forth that has been happening over the last little while.

The federal government is responsible for supplying first nations on reserve communities with the tools and resources that they require, all the services that I listed prior on some of the first nations communities that I visited. The duty is divided among three ministries. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development provides funding to first nations for infrastructure repair and managed water services in their communities. Health Canada monitors water quality management on reserves. Environment Canada manages sourced water protection.

In many cases, I have heard that the rules and regulations have taken effect in many communities, not just aboriginal communities but non-aboriginal communities as well. This is one of the big reasons that, in places like Newfoundland and Labrador, there are over 200 boil water advisories in the smallest of the communities. The reason is that local governance has become extremely frustrated in dealing with that higher end of government. This argument is not new. This argument pertains to many departments.

As was pointed out earlier, we need to engage in discussions with the people at the very base of any particular community that sees itself under a boil water advisory. I have some of them in my riding. They are non-aboriginal. The problem is such that the infrastructure crumbles beneath them. For aboriginal communities, like Attawapiskat, it was even much worse. It has so much to overcome. People who consider themselves an expert on infrastructure and providing clean water must look at this and ask where we start. However, we need to start somewhere.

I am glad we are raising this issue because maybe today's debate will create a spark by which we will be able to make that mechanism a far easier way to help the most vulnerable.

I want to again thank my colleagues for doing this today because I have heard some really great stuff concerning not just clean water, but the basic human rights of communities and individuals. Canada is the greatest country for communities because we band together and we band together to make better communities for our children. What we have here is a great debate.

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I would encourage us to move from this point, as my friend from Saanich—Gulf Islands pointed out, to a point of positive action to ensure that the basic human right of clean water that is outlined in international agreements comes to fruition in a great country like Canada.

• (1710)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments from my colleague on what we believe is a very important issue.

In Manitoba, the impact is so profound that we look to the government to give it extra attention. The Government of Manitoba wants to work with the federal government to see something happen on this file.

I wonder if my colleague could comment on how important it is that provincial governments, such as Manitoba, get involved where they might be able to ensure that quality water is delivered to all citizens.

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, I neglected to mention the conversations that take place at the federal-provincial level. We know about this in Newfoundland and Labrador with the situation we had several years ago in northern Labrador.

I do not feel that standards are as vigorously enforced as they should be. My colleague from British Columbia mentioned the same thing earlier. When it comes to the standards by which we judge clean drinking water, where is the law on this? Where are the regulations? Where does it say that we need to have this? In order to have a basic human right fulfilled, we need to have a law that is enforceable so that the people have an opportunity to fight for their basic human rights through the processes that we have in the country.

I noticed in a letter to my hon. colleague for St. Paul's from the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development that it talked about the assessment released on July 14, 2011. It reads:

...the majority of risk is due to capacity issues, although infrastructure issues and lack of enforceable standards are also a factor. Department officials are engaging with First Nations and other stakeholders on the recommendations and next steps.

Herein lies what I think is a monumental task. It has a lot to do with communication, more so than getting the right equipment in there to ensure this happens and engaging the community in the best way possible, but a lot of times we do not do that.

I suspect that a couple of months from now those 200 boil water advisories I spoke of in my province will still be there. A lot of it has to do with the communication. We need to provide the spark in order for the federal government to talk with the provincial and territorial governments, as well as first nations groups across this country, including people like Shawn Atleo.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this has been a very worthwhile debate today. I think the spirit in which of some of the presentations have been made have been positive and with some very good points made. We know very well that government after government of different political stripes and some provincial initiatives that have been undertaken were well-intended but governments have fallen short.

Earlier in the debate, before I had to leave the chamber, the comment was made about access to freshwater. Two of the main health factors and greatest challenges first nations communities face right now are obesity and diabetes. We are seeing first nations consuming more pop because, in some rural communities, the cost of milk is unaffordable and they drink pop instead. If they had access to clean drinking water, would my colleague think that this would—

• (1715)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please. I must interrupt the hon. member for Cape Breton—Canso. We will not have the opportunity to hear the answer from his colleague.

It being 5:15 p.m., it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply.

The question is on the amendment. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the amendment?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion as amended?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion, as amended, agreed to)

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Mr. Speaker, I ask that you see the clock at 5:30.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Does the Chief Government Whip have unanimous support to see the clock at 5:30?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 5:30, the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

PREVENTING PERSONS FROM CONCEALING THEIR IDENTITY DURING RIOTS AND UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLIES ACT

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC) moved that Bill C-309, An Act to amend the Criminal code (concealment of identity), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to open debate today on my private member's Bill C-309, the preventing persons from concealing their identity during riots and unlawful assemblies act.

This legislation would add new penalties for wearing a disguise to those sections of the Criminal Code that deal with individuals who participate in a riot or an unlawful assembly. This bill is a measured response to a problem that law enforcement officials have grappled with for years, and the need for which has been further highlighted by recent events in the cities of Toronto and Vancouver.

At the G20 meetings in Toronto, and again in Vancouver after game seven of the Stanley Cup playoffs in June, law-abiding citizens were assaulted; businesses were broken into, vandalized and looted of their merchandise; and public property owned by taxpayers, such as police cars, was torched and destroyed. These violent events had a theme in common that was noted by law enforcement officers who were working to protect public safety at the time. They noted the prevalence of people who wore masks or facial coverings to conceal their identities during the commission of criminal acts.

According to police, some of the perpetrators deliberately masked up prior to the gatherings becoming violent, while others mingled in the crowd and covered their faces in order to carry out criminal acts of opportunity. These offenders vandalized property and assaulted police officers and innocent bystanders. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Who here can forget the images from Vancouver of looters with their shirts, jackets or hockey jerseys yanked up over their face while streaming through broken store windows with heaps of stolen merchandise, or thugs jumping into the crowds to kick or hit an innocent bystander in the thick of the rioting?

These images tell a very revealing story. They tell us that criminals are well aware in this age of social media and all-pervasive cellphone cameras that they run a very high risk of their behaviour being recorded and they had better hide their identity if they want to avoid being caught and brought to justice for their actions. More and more of them are doing exactly that. In too many cases, these offenders escape identification by covering or obscuring their face at the time of the offence. This is an unacceptable state of affairs. No one should be able to commit violent and destructive crimes against persons and property with impunity under a cloak of anonymity, yet that is exactly what we have seen happen in these cases.

Police have long advised that their inability to pre-emptively deal with individuals who were concealing their identities in the middle of such explosive situations is hindering their ability to maintain control and to protect the public. Currently, there is no authority for police to pre-emptively stop people from concealing their identity in a riot. They must observe an offence before they can move to stop it, even by a masked individual and even in a riot. Their powers in these dangerous situations are reactive rather than proactive. Our Criminal Code does provide a penalty for disguise with intent in subsection 351(2).

When police in Vancouver recently recommended charges of participating in a riot against some of the suspected rioters there, they did in fact propose charges under that section in a very small number of cases, but why only in a small number of cases? In only a small number of cases where people had their faces concealed were police able to verify the suspect's identity afterwards.

The charge of disguise with intent can be a challenging one to apply, and since it is applied in the aftermath of an incident, it is not altogether helpful in actually controlling riot situations as they occur.

A police officer trying to maintain control in the midst of a riot has little time or means to meet the high level of intent needed to satisfy subsection 351(2). They are too busy defending life and limb, their own and those of the citizens they were sworn to protect. Yet police repeatedly tell us that it is these very people, those who disguise

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themselves and mask their faces, that are most often the instigators and the ringleaders of such trouble.

What if there were a measure designed to strip away anonymity from criminals during such disturbances? What if the very act of wearing a disguise in a riot became in and of itself an offence? What if police had the means to order those who were concealing their identities in a riot to remove their disguises or risk detainment or arrest? That would change the stakes dramatically.

• (1720)

People would then have a very clear choice in front of them. They could choose to remove their disguise, show their face and be identified and held accountable for their criminal actions, or they could choose not to and risk arrest for the offence of wearing a mask in a riot. Either way, public safety would be improved.

It would improve public safety by providing a new deterrent for people to wear disguises in the first place. If people think twice about concealing themselves, then surely the prospect of committing a crime without the benefit of anonymity would give them even greater pause. This would allow us to better identify people who engage in criminal riotous behaviour and it would improve the police's ability to deal with people who are wearing disguises at the time of an incident, thereby preventing them from rioting at all.

This bill is a good idea, but it is not necessarily a new idea. Other democratic governments, such as those in the United Kingdom, France and the State of New York, have developed legislation that would either limit or prohibit the wearing of disguises, masks or facial coverings. For example, in 2001, the United Kingdom passed the anti-terrorism crime and security act, which includes sections regarding the use of masks and disguises.

It is only when a peaceful protest or assembly turns into a riot or an unlawful assembly that the provisions of the bill would come into force.

When does a peaceful assembly become a riot or an unlawful assembly? The Criminal Code tells us when. It tells us that an unlawful assembly has occurred when:

—three or more persons who, with intent to carry out any common purpose, assemble in such a manner or so conduct themselves when they are assembled as to cause persons in the neighbourhood of the assembly to fear, on reasonable grounds, that they

(a) will disturb the peace tumultuously; or

(b) will, by that assembly needlessly and without reasonable cause provoke other persons to disturb the peace tumultuously.

When do we know that police are dealing with a riot situation? Again, the Criminal Code, in section 64, tells us a riot is occurring when “an unlawful assembly has begun to disturb the peace tumultuously”.

We see in law that an unlawful assembly evolves into a riot when there is tumultuous conduct by participants. Typically this involves acts of violence or threatened violence, or destruction of property.

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Both definitions provide us with clear indicators of when a peaceful assembly has ceased to be such and when police are now intervening in an illegal act. It is therefore no infringement on charter rights to peaceful assembly for police to intervene when such an assembly has degraded into either an unlawful assembly or a riot.

It is in those same situations when police are working to restore order that the provisions of Bill C-309 would make it necessary for any masks or disguises worn by participants to be taken off immediately.

Riots and unlawful assemblies already carry Criminal Code penalties. Bill C-309 would simply amend already existing sections of the code to make it an added offence to wear a mask or other disguise to conceal one's identity during these illegal acts.

Let us be clear. Anyone who is wearing a mask or a disguise to conceal his or her face in the midst of a riot is exhibiting aggravating behaviour. Law-abiding citizens who get caught up in a riot will naturally be seeking to clear the area on police orders. It is hard to imagine that others who ignore police instructions to depart the area and who, in addition, continue to linger in the vicinity while wearing a disguise are seized by any innocent motives or good intentions in those kind of circumstances.

This bill would not remove police discretion. Police who are trying to restore order and protect safety in a riot situation are not likely to be interested in pursuing anyone who is already obeying orders to leave the area. In fact, someone fleeing the scene of a riot on police orders may in a real sense be seen as no longer participating in a riot as defined by the code.

It is not the people leaving the scene of trouble who have the police's attention. It is the loitering, masked troublemakers who concern the police. Someone with his or her shirt up to block out tear gas for example is not likely to concern riot control police if that individual is actively running away from the scene. However, individuals who come prepared with gas masks or bandanas and are wearing them in the trouble spot in defiance of police directions to move on is another story.

• (1725)

There is evidence that at these riots many of the people wearing masks and facial coverings were part of organized groups with premeditated intent on confronting the police and causing mayhem. In addition to targeting the criminals of opportunity that we see at riots, this law also targets anarchists, those individuals who come to protest with the premeditated intent to use the assembly as a cover for their criminal behaviour.

Anarchist groups are increasingly employing the tactic of concealing their identity by wearing disguises, masks, or other facial coverings for the purpose of committing unlawful acts in a riot situation. Police have seen it time and again, individuals with their faces concealed mixing into a group and then instigating riotous behaviour, such as throwing objects at police, tossing marbles under the legs of police horses to trip them up, or covering up their faces before smashing windows, setting fires, stealing, assaulting people or flipping over vehicles. These individuals then remove their facial coverings and slip away in the confusion, some never to be

apprehended. It is vexing for police and dangerous for the public to see such individuals escape the consequences of their actions.

I would argue that their clean getaways in fact embolden them to redouble their efforts and engage in criminality again, but Bill C-309 presents a new tool for police to deal with them. These people would now risk arrest for wearing their masks in a riot. Police would no longer have to wait for them to start assaulting people and destroying property before they could move against them.

Police know they need this ability to act pre-emptively against disguised individuals in riot situations. Police chiefs in a number of Canada's major cities, including Calgary, Toronto, Vancouver and Victoria, have all told me they support my bill.

Vancouver Chief Constable Jim Chu had this specifically to say about my bill:

The Vancouver Police Department is pleased to support this bill. When we see protestors in a crowd donning masks and hoods we know there is a very good chance that violence will soon follow.

In a resolution that he drafted this year for the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, Victoria Chief Constable Jamie Graham urged the government to take aim at this particular problem. His resolution had this to say about masked individuals: "Wearing facial covering allows an offender to blend in and mix with a larger lawful group of peaceful individuals without being identified. There an offender may commit unlawful acts under disguise then remove their masks or facial coverings and blend in with peaceful protestors." It goes on to say: "Wearing a disguise, masks or other facial coverings allows a person to conceal their identity whose intent it is to commit an unlawful act prior to, during or immediately after a lawful assembly or protest."

Police know through hard experience that it is often the organized ring leaders or instigators of such trouble who come prepared with materials to conceal their identities, or it is people who decide in the thick of things to assault others or destroy property who will attempt to conceal their identities, as we saw in Vancouver. Whoever they are, organized or not, no one in Canada should be able to hide in plain sight while committing crimes.

I have heard some suggest that if this bill passes, it may target individuals who wear facial coverings for religious or cultural reasons, but that view fails to take into account the exemption in this bill for lawful excuse. My bill states:

Every person who commits an offence...while wearing a mask or other disguise to conceal their identity without lawful excuse is guilty of an indictable offence—

What are examples of a lawful excuse? Someone who legitimately wears cultural or religious dress that obscures the face, or bandages for legitimate medical purposes, for example, might fall under the exemption. Someone who could demonstrate a lawful excuse that is legitimate and provable for wearing a face covering would not face the penalties of Bill C-309, although the person would still face the existing penalties for participating in a riot.

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I will close by urging my colleagues in the House to support Bill C-309. I am convinced that no one in the chamber of any political persuasion wants to see repeats of the destruction and violence that took place in Vancouver and Toronto. This bill has the potential to deter and de-escalate such unfortunate events in the future to protect persons and property. I sincerely hope that all members will join me in moving the bill forward.

• (1730)

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate my colleague's bill. It raises some interesting questions. Would the lawful excuse exemption apply to police officers acting as agents provocateurs or attempts to become part of the riot, as has been experienced in Quebec?

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Speaker, first and foremost, this legislation is designed specifically for people who are participating in riots. If police officers are trying to control the situation, they are obviously not participants in the riot. They are there to try to stop the riot.

Second, lawful excuse applies. Anyone who has lawful excuse to be wearing a facial covering, whatever the reason might be, would certainly not be touched under this legislation.

This is intended for the people who are trying to cause harm to other individuals and to property, while disguising themselves to commit those crimes with impunity. This is intended to cover that.

• (1735)

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my concern with the legislation also relates to the wide breadth given to the phrase "lawful excuse" by the hon. member and the fact that this bill to amend the Criminal Code has been brought forward as a private member's bill.

It strikes me that with the government's preoccupation with law and order and the fact that there have been substantial amendments to criminal legislation already, the breadth of the term "lawful excuse", which causes me great concern from a charter perspective, would be subject to much further and better scrutiny from the perspective of whether there would be a charter violation if this had come in as a piece of government legislation. There would also be the opportunity for much more debate.

On this side we have very serious concerns about the constitutionality of the legislation and we do not share the narrow reading that he does with respect to the "lawful excuse". I would invite his comments on that.

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Speaker, first, I have crafted the legislation to try to deal with a problem that we have in the country, one that has been identified to me many times by police chiefs and officers who have tried to control these kinds of situations.

The member also mentions that our government has brought forward a number of pieces of legislation to deal with what we see as some of the issues in the Criminal Code, which were left by the previous Liberal government, the party of which he is a member. It chose to ignore these situations and leave them unfixed for many years.

We are attempting to right some of the wrongs that were left by the previous government of which he is a member of that party. I am

proud of those pieces of legislation that our government has brought forward.

However, this is legislation that I have designed in response to a specific problem that we see lacking in the Criminal Code. He mentions debate, and I certainly welcome all debate that is possible in the House. At committee level, I would be open to any suggestions I hear from members.

This legislation is designed to specifically fix a problem that police officers have identified to me in terms of trying to control these situations from getting out of hand.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to applaud the member for Wild Rose for Bill C-309, for his interest in public safety and for responding to concerns raised by police officers and citizens about providing more tools where there is a need and a gap in the Criminal Code to ensure that public safety is first and foremost the goal of our government and the goal of Canadians.

I note his amendment to the Criminal Code proposes a term of five years imprisonment for offenders. However, I also know that section 351(2) of the code also has an offence for disguise with intent and it proposes a term of imprisonment not to exceed 10 years.

Has the member for Wild Rose given any consideration to amending his bill to harmonize his penalties with what is in the Criminal Code today?

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Speaker, this has been previously raised by other members of the House as well.

I did have to have some consideration of what the penalties would be, looking at various other offences in the Criminal Code and trying to find a way to make it seem a reasonable penalty.

In this case, with the other section 351 being 10 years, it does seem like a very reasonable amendment. It is something that I am definitely considering. I am definitely going to raise that at the committee level. I look forward to the conversation I will have at the committee level. This may be an amendment that we make to the bill.

[Translation]

Ms. Charmaine Borg (Terrebonne—Blainville, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when examining the provisions of a bill, I think parliamentarians have a duty to ask themselves a simple question: will this bill improve our society? Today we are looking at Bill C-309, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (concealment of identity). I have no doubt that the author of this bill was motivated by a desire to improve public safety. That seems to be the answer the government automatically gives these days. Thus, members really need to ask themselves if this bill is an effective way to improve public safety.

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Let us be clear: like all parties, the NDP condemns any vandalism and criminal behaviour at any assembly. Furthermore, we fully agree that any crime committed by someone wearing a mask deserves a tougher sentence. The NDP fully supports the sections of the Criminal Code that protect the public against seditious behaviour, vandalism and the masked individuals who commit these acts. What worries me, however, is the direction in which bills like this on public safety are taking us. I imagine this bill was drafted in response to the problem of crimes committed anonymously by people wearing masks during unlawful assemblies or riots.

No one is denying the troubling images that came out of the recent riots in Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto. In fact, I have a great deal of empathy for all the small businesses and shops that were damaged during these demonstrations. It is extremely sad, and I hope they will be compensated for this. In some cases, some of the offenders did indeed wear masks; I am aware of that. If this bill truly is a response to those events, then it is the responsibility of this House to determine whether it is a suitable and adequate response. Let us look at the content of this bill.

It proposes two very simple changes to the Criminal Code. Clause 2 of the bill calls for a change to section 65 of the Criminal Code making it a criminal offence to wear a mask or any other disguise when participating in a riot. The bill also proposes amending section 66 of the Criminal Code, which is essentially the same thing, but in the context of an unlawful assembly.

I want to come back to my original question: will this legislation improve our society? Changing our society for the better means recognizing a problem and being willing to solve it. As I was saying before, the NDP fully supports subsection 351(2) of the Criminal Code, which makes it an offence to cover one's face in the commission of a crime. The courts have recognized that wearing a mask during the commission of a crime can be considered an aggravating factor during sentencing. There are existing measures for handing down tougher sentences for an act committed by a criminal who wears a mask.

How will this bill help Canadians? Is the purpose of Bill C-309 to make it illegal to take part in a riot or unlawful assembly? In that case, Canadians are already protected by the Criminal Code. If the purpose of the bill is to introduce punitive measures against someone who commits a crime, such as vandalism, while taking part in a riot or unlawful assembly, Canadians are already protected by the Criminal Code, as I explained previously. If the purpose is to increase sentences for individuals who commit crimes while concealing their identity, once again, Canadians are protected by court decisions.

Under the Criminal Code, taking part in a riot or unlawful assembly and committing vandalism or other crimes during an unlawful assembly are already illegal, and concealing one's identity while committing a crime during an unlawful assembly or riot is considered to be an aggravating factor. Therefore, I question the need for this bill. I believe that it is basically redundant. The main issues of public safety that are the basis for this bill are already covered by the Criminal Code. This bill's only new contribution is to make it an offence to conceal one's identity while taking part in a riot or unlawful assembly.

● (1740)

According to this bill, an individual could be detained, arrested, indicted and sentenced to a maximum of five years in prison simply for being a masked spectator in the area of an unlawful assembly.

In June 2010, during the G20 in Toronto, Canadians witnessed how a small riot led to police crackdowns. The result: thousands of innocent people were arrested and detained. Approximately 1,500 Canadians were arrested or detained as a result of a riot involving fewer than 20 people. The authorities subjectively considered the whole demonstration as an unlawful assembly and took away the civil liberties of 1,500 innocent demonstrators, journalists and spectators. We must remember these events when we are considering a bill such as this one.

The limitations imposed on civil liberties to ensure public safety must be the least restrictive possible. I think that all the hon. members would agree with me on this. Otherwise, there is no limit to the restrictions that can be imposed on fundamental freedoms.

I would also like to point out that this bill takes away an individual's right to demonstrate anonymously. An individual is not necessarily going to commit a crime just because he or she is wearing a mask at a riot. It is reasonable to think that the person just wants to remain anonymous and protect his or her identity.

In the context of this bill, we must recognize the risk of political profiling of people exercising their civil liberties. Too often, 99% of protestors are peaceful, while 1% choose to vandalize. More often than not, this 1% is condemned by the vast majority of the peaceful protestors. As we saw in Toronto in June 2010, the peaceful protestors and spectators can be close to non-peaceful protestors. But this bill could lead to the arrest of innocent protestors who wear masks because of their geographic proximity to non-peaceful protestors.

It bears repeating that criminals who conceal their identity are already punished more severely in this country. I also want to point out that this bill would give judges the discretionary power under the Criminal Code to consider an offence committed while wearing a mask as an aggravating factor. Some people may consider that to be a good thing. However, a 2005 judgment by the Provincial Court of Alberta, *R. v. Potter*, already provides that protection.

I would like to thank the member for introducing this bill in the House. I understand the source of his concerns. However, in its current form, this bill is redundant and could have serious consequences for civil liberties in this country. I encourage members in this House to carefully examine the implications of this bill and to ask themselves whether it is worth jeopardizing our civil liberties. I am leaving it up to the House to decide on an appropriate course of action.

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• (1745)

[English]

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to speak to Bill C-309, but I want to begin by confronting the Conservatives on their obsession with crime. We have before us a bill ostensibly produced by the folks in the Prime Minister's Office or the Conservative House leader's office. I think we need to be clear about this. Their so-called crime agenda is in full swing, predicated on ideology and not evidence. They do not believe in evidence or facts.

The Conservatives want to continue creating fear among Canadians and to perpetuate the idea that there is rampant crime on the streets, that there are riots everywhere, that the government, in response, must be brave and take decisive action to breathe life into that particular bogeyman. On the rare occasion that Conservatives might actually propose something that appears worthy of some consideration, they wonder why Canadians are suspicious.

The Conservatives' record of ignoring evidence and perpetuating fear is well-known. The fear agenda gives me rise to questions about their sincerity. One only has to look at Bill C-10, safe streets and communities act. As far as I am concerned, it should be called "keeping the myth of out of control crime alive so we can fundraise to our right-wing base act".

For the Conservatives, repeating a myth often enough convinces them that it must be true. It is a classic right-wing Republican tactic; that is to say, the Conservatives operate not unlike a pack of hyenas. They see an opportunity to feast on the fears of Canadians, fears which are often of their own creation, and then they pounce. As part of the bullying tactics, they are always ready to attack anyone who disagrees with them, then issue a fundraising letter containing more myths. This behaviour, now firmly rooted in their political DNA, is a again not unlike the hyena, opportunistic and completely natural. Then they call it tough on crime. I call it tough on facts and evidence.

When I meet people around the country and in my riding, they are not running up to me and talking about crime or crime rates. They are more concerned about jobs and the economy. They are concerned that my riding of Charlottetown is losing 500 jobs as a result of cuts to Veterans Affairs. They are worried about the cuts to Service Canada and the closure of EI processing centres.

They do not understand why the federal government is the only level of government that will not participate in the funding to clean up a sewage problem in the Charlottetown harbour. They do not understand why the Conservatives have cancelled a cable that would ensure energy security to Prince Edward Island.

Here we are with another crime bill. Why did the member not introduce a bill to reduce poverty in Canada, a bill to help the poor, and to bring them in from the margins of poverty? Why did he not do that?

It is as if the Conservatives lie awake at night dreaming about ways to put more and more people in prison. It is an obsession rooted not in science or evidence, or even reason. It is irrational.

I want to assure the member that none of us on this side will stand by while Conservatives proffer myths or slogans. None of us on this side will tolerate the idea that because we disagree with the Conservatives on matters related to crime, that somehow we do not care or we are soft on crime. It is a falsehood and the members opposite know it. To disagree with the government is not a crime, at least not yet, but who knows?

With respect to the bill, we all witnessed what happened in Vancouver last year during the Stanley Cup. We know that the behaviour of far too many people was deplorable and criminal. None of us who sat around watching the hockey game that night and the news stories thereafter were thinking, gee, we wish there were more destruction and violence. None of us said, "Gee, I hope that guy who just set fire to the car gets away with it". Listening to the Conservatives though, one would think that members from this side were there and involved.

• (1750)

I wonder what the member thinks about his own government's behaviour with respect to the G20 in Toronto. What does he think about what occurred, when at the G20 peaceful protesters, yes, peaceful protesters, were summarily denied their constitutional and charter rights to freely assemble?

What does he think, when protesters, acting peacefully, not violently, were kettled, rounded up and detained in violation of their charter rights? Why is the member not proposing a bill about protecting the rights of legitimate protesters?

What is his position on those well-documented violations of constitutional rights? Does he believe that citizens have a right to peaceful protest? Why is it that he and his government have refused thus far a public inquiry into the behaviour of the police and his own government with respect to the serious and rampant violation of constitutional rights at the G20?

The right of Canadians to assemble, and to do so peacefully, is a right protected by the charter, a document that many on the other side deep down really do detest. Rioting is already a crime, as the member knows.

The bill before us is deliberately framed in a way that if anyone were to disagree or to suggest amendments, he or she would automatically be designated as a traitor to a Conservative crime cause. Conservatives call that debate?

No one wants to support any Canadian engaging in activity that destroys property, encourages violence and rioting. None of us wish to support the deliberate concealment of someone while engaging in a riot. However, if this government were truly serious about this issue, this proposal would be on the government agenda. If it were brought in by government, it would have been open to have been tested, as required by statute by the Department of Justice, to ensure that it was constitutional.

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This is a government bill in disguise. The suggestion that a backbench MP, in this environment, in the controlled and contrived Conservative government, such as the one we have now, would produce a bill without the consent of the PMO and its House leader's office is quite frankly a stretch.

If the government were serious about amending the Criminal Code to deal with aggravating circumstances, such as those contemplated in this private member's bill, it should have introduced a government bill. At least that would have allowed for greater and wider debate. The Conservatives are not interested in debate, nor facts, nor evidence. We see a sad example happening right now in the justice committee.

We will review Bill C-309, insist that it receive a thorough analysis, and if necessary, propose amendments. Until we are convinced that the bill meets the test of the charter, we will not and cannot support it.

Members should listen to this because what I am about to say will probably send shivers up the spines of the Conservatives. If we can be convinced by evidence and facts, and the testimony of experts that this bill is constitutional, then let the debate begin.

• (1755)

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to add to the debate of Bill C-309, a bill to prevent persons from concealing their identities during a riot or unlawful assembly.

I would like to provide the House with a few details here with my 18 years of experience as a former RCMP officer. One of the things in my training involved the participation in a riot as part of a tactical troop. Some of the general public call it the riot squad.

What I am hearing from the opposition could not be further from the truth. It is about trying to protect the civil rights of individuals, when they demonstrate, and ensuring the public peace is upheld.

During riots or civil protests, it is appalling to watch the behaviour of certain individuals, when they are trying to promote or instigate a full out riot, and where individuals are being set up, at the expense of others, for harsh punishment or harsh injuries.

The bill, which was put forward by my colleague, the member for Wild Rose, would make it an offence to wear a mask or to otherwise conceal or disguise one's identity during riots and other unlawful assemblies.

The provisions of the bill are necessary. One might even say they are overdue, as recent events have shown. In the space of just over a year, two large cities in Canada have been the sites of major riots.

Destruction of public property was widespread when anarchists descended on Toronto, using the cover of a peaceful protest during the G20 meetings, to shatter windows, clash with police officers, and threaten innocent bystanders, even news reporters and photographers in their path. Fires burned in the streets and black smoke billowed over the skyline.

Thugs used the excuse of the Vancouver Canucks loss in the seventh game of the Stanley Cup finals to wreak havoc in that city. Police cars were overturned and businesses were broken into and

looted. Canadians were heartbroken and horrified to see such mayhem in their country. It is sadly ironic that something as un-Canadian as a violent riot could happen in the wake of the most Canadian of activities, a hockey game of all things.

These riots were also an international black eye for Canada, a nation that is admired as a world leader for peace, order and safety.

These riots started in different cities under different circumstances. However, in both cities much of the violence and looting was carried out by people who concealed their faces with gas masks, bandanas, balaclavas, even hockey jerseys pulled over their noses. Other materials were used to conceal the many faces of the rioters and looters. I believe this is cowardly and the thugs knew exactly what the consequences of their criminality would be.

For the most part, these are not the actions of exuberant or inebriated people simply caught up in the moment. These were calculated efforts by people intent on criminal behaviour in order to avoid prosecution. Leaving themselves anonymous, these hoodlums felt free to assault people, and destroy public and private property.

I remember watching these individuals on the news on television dress up and proceed to smash windows, and then try to flee the scene of the crime. With BlackBerrys and YouTube, innocent good citizens chased these people down, watched them undress to join the crowd again, caught in their black apparel. The Vancouver police are still working to identify some of these rioters and bring them to justice.

I do not fault the police for the time it has taken to trace these individuals because many investigations are very complex and the complexity of this is of huge magnitude to undertake. Rather, I sympathize with the enormous task ahead, as the police tries to identify and charge the perpetrators who, in many cases, had most of their identifying features covered up.

It cannot be easy for the investigators, I know, but members of the House could help make that task less onerous in the future. They could help through the simple act of supporting Bill C-309.

How would that help? It would help in a number of ways. Most importantly, it would help deter violence at such events from escalating in the first place.

• (1800)

In an era of cellphones, cameras and video, when every bystander has the potential to be a reporter, a law preventing people from disguising themselves would give many people a time to pause. The deterrence value alone is of great value for police trying to control a mob and ensure the public's safety is maintained.

I am not blind to the reality, having observed this myself. While deterring crime is the reason behind any piece of criminal legislation, we know there are those who have no respect for the law, no matter what the consequences.

Private Members' Business

Bill C-309 would give the police a valuable tool to deal with them. It would be another tool in their tool kit. In a riot or an unlawful assembly, law-abiding citizens should be eager to follow police instructions to disperse and clear the area for the sake of their own personal safety, and that safety is the utmost when police are at the scene. It defies common sense to believe that any persons ignoring orders to do so and who, in addition, are wearing a mask to conceal themselves are there for any good purpose, which brings me to a point of reflection.

I remember, through all my training, having to stand in a black jumpsuit, wearing a helmet, steel toe boots, gloves, shoulder protectors and a gas mask in the heat of the day and watching the perpetrators don the same apparel; the shoulder pads, motorcycle helmets, balaclavas and gas masks. They would try to grab members' shields as they were trying to protect innocent bystanders. They would try to antagonize bystanders to start a riot. It was hard for us to be on the other side and keep our temper and watch while the media was in the middle. All these thugs are doing is using the media for their own gain.

As things stand, unless the police witness a person committing an offence, they need to prove a high level of intent before they intervene, even when a person is wearing a disguise or otherwise hiding his or her identity, even in the midst of an all out riot. This state of affairs just does not make sense.

We have 11 police officers in this caucus. Police need to have the ability to diffuse riots, just not to react. That is reacting policing, not preventive policing.

Bill C-309 would unshackle police in such situations by making the very act of wearing a mask in a riot or an unlawful assembly an offence on its own. Police would be able to identify those individuals before a major casualty took place.

Simply put, when police are engaged in measures to control a riot or unlawful assembly, as defined under sections 65 and 66 of the Criminal Code, which this bill would amend, then wearing a facial covering without lawful excuse to do so would become an offence in itself. This provision would help police deal with these individuals for the offence of wearing a mask rather than waiting to witness them commit a separate offence that could harm persons or property before they can take action.

This bill is pre-emptive in a sense that police could use their discretion to arrest or detain people who keep their faces concealed during a riot.

It is my hope that the penalties in the bill would first and foremost deter people from participating in a riot or unlawful assembly in the first place. However, for those who still choose to riot despite the consequences, police would have a new tool in their tool kit to help them control these volatile situations.

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees Canadians the freedom of peaceful assembly, which includes peaceful protests, and law enforcement officers understand this. They want to ensure that all people have the right to protest but, utmost, to get rid of the thugs who are causing the problems in the protests. Let those who want to demonstrate do so, but do so peacefully.

I have heard some people say that they worry that this will infringe upon that freedom. Nothing could be further from the truth. Having witnessed this myself first-hand, the police are there just to maintain and ensure that the protestors are safe. This bill deals only with individuals in a riot or an unlawful assembly situation. It is obvious that peaceful assembly has left the building at this point.

● (1805)

Far from violating the Charter of Rights, the bill would help protect peaceful protesters by allowing police to identify those in the mix who intend to commit crimes. I find that interesting. I remember one incident where one masked protester was running back and forth trying to escalate the event.

I hope that, for the safety of the general public, members will consider Bill C-309 as it would give people the right to honestly and protectively protest in peace. I urge the House to consider Bill C-309.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have an opportunity to say a few words about Bill C-309, which is a private member's bill and not a government bill. We keep seeing more of these bills from the opposite side where everybody decides that they want to have a crack at the Criminal Code because, for some reason or another, the Criminal Code is inadequate to handle crime.

I have a copy of the Criminal Code here, and it is a very heavy document. It is about three inches thick and it has a lot of crimes in it, yet there do not seem to be enough crimes for the members opposite so we need to add more.

I have heard the members opposite say that there was no proof that the long gun registry prevented one crime. I understand the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety says that is "true, true, true", but I do not agree with her. I invite her to look at the alternative title. This act may be cited as the preventing persons from concealing their identity during riots and unlawful assembly act. Would making it a crime to wear a mask during a riot actually prevent it from happening? Of course it will not prevent it from happening. It would punish it by making it an additional criminal offence. Somehow, knowing where guns are, having a system that keeps track of them and prevents people from selling them willy-nilly, as in the gun registry, for example, does not prevent a single crime and does not prevent guns from getting into the wrong hands, but yet making something a crime by this bill is preventing crime.

As I say, this is a private member's bill and private members are entitled to bring whatever pieces of legislation they want. However, that also means that we need to have a good look at it.

The Criminal Code is called a code for a reason. It is a complex, interwoven series of bills brought together over time. I think the first Criminal Code in Canada was introduced in 1892 in an attempt to codify the criminal law. There have been changes made over time but it is really something that governments, not private members, should do because it is criminal law. It is a very serious matter. In this case, if this law were passed, it could make somebody liable to imprisonment for five years for being at an unlawful assembly with a mask.

Adjournment Proceedings

It always worries me when private members start delving into the Criminal Code and looking for new offences, because they do not always read the entire Criminal Code, and I do not expect them to, so they may not know what else is in the Criminal Code. Some lawyers know perhaps a little more than some people. However, I need to point out to hon. members that it is already an offence to wear a mask with the intent to commit an indictable offence. There is already a substantive section of the Criminal Code that says a person cannot wear a mask with the intent to commit an indictable offence. It is subsection 351(2).

What are we doing creating new offences? Why are we doing that? If there is a need to charge somebody for wearing a mask with intent to commit an indictable offence, and rioting is considered an indictable offence, then the tool is already there. We need to be very careful about assemblies, whether they are lawful or unlawful and when they become unlawful and what is considered unlawful, because nobody supports rioting.

•(1810)

The last time I looked at the Criminal Code, smashing windows, whether one is wearing a mask or not, is a criminal offence. Burning police cars is a criminal offence. The fact that someone wears a mask is an additional criminal offence, already.

The kind of remarks we get from members opposite is that we like the idea of people burning police cars. This is the kind of talk that makes people wonder what those fellows do with their time. Do they think we like rioters? No. We have the same feelings about people taking that kind of action as they do. Those members do not have a monopoly on feeling terrible when somebody does something like that, destroying property, or police cars or starting fires. No citizen of the country enjoys that.

The member talked about the G20 in Toronto. He did not talk about the law-abiding citizens who were arrested and herded into police custody, or the tourists who happened to show up with their children and were arrested. He did not talk about the proper understanding of how crowds could be controlled.

We have to be very careful about passing laws willy-nilly on issues that are already be handled by the existing Criminal Code.

The members cannot come in here, be heroes and say that they are disgusted with rioters, so they want to have a new crime on the books. It is already a crime to engage in a riot. If we look at the definition of a riot, it does not take very much to allow a police officer to arrest somebody. Not only that, there is already a provision in the Criminal Code that makes it an indictable offence to wear a mask with the intent of committing a criminal offence. People do not even have to commit a criminal offence, they just need to have the intent to commit a criminal offence. Rioting is an indictable offence.

We have to be careful when we start taking the Criminal Code, adding sections, increasing penalties and so on. It does not serve to prevent things from happening.

Nevertheless members opposite think they have come up with behaviour that disgusts people, like rioting, and that disgusts me as much as them, and they want to create a new crime. However, it is already against the law. It is already in the Criminal Code.

If the government and the Department of Justice looks at all of these things and says that somehow or other the law is inadequate and that it wants to refine it, it is something I think all members of Parliament would like to listen to and hear the justification for it.

However to stand and say “I am disgusted with rioters, therefore we should make the penalties harsher or add new penalties” when the Criminal Code already treats it as a crime, is using Parliament for the wrong purpose.

I respect the hon. member. I know he is sincere in what he says, but to suggest that this somehow will prevent these things from happening is a bit naive, particularly when it is already a criminal offence. I have a few cases here where individuals were arrested for wearing bandannas.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Why are you trying to protect criminals?

Mr. Jack Harris: Why am I trying to protect criminals? This is the kind of nonsense we hear, sometimes, from the members opposite. This is not about protecting criminals. This is about telling him that he should read the Criminal Code.

If they want to change the Criminal Code, they should read the one that is there first, not just come up with ideas that they think will go over big with the folks back home because they saw it on TV and they are disgusted, too. It is already against the law and the people who do that should be arrested and charged with the full force of the law. I do not have a problem with that. It is what should happen.

•(1815)

I heard the problem in Vancouver was that the police officers were not there in force ready to take on the challenge and did not pay attention to the signs. I am not criticizing them. That was a criticism made by somebody else.

However, people who commit crimes should clearly be arrested and given criminal charges, and we already have that in the Criminal Code.

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

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

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

Adjournment Proceedings

[Translation]

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Tarik Brahmi (Saint-Jean, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on June 9, I asked the Minister of Finance to explain what the Canadian government was doing to show leadership in order to reduce growing household debt in Canada. Unfortunately, his response was limited to expressing a great deal of optimism, but he provided very few answers that were satisfactory to me or to Canadians in general. The main argument was that the economy was doing well. I do not think that relying on the economy and interest rates is a reasonable way to help taxpayers pay down their debts or stop going further into debt.

In Quebec, in the past 20 years, consumer debt has increased by 700%. According to Statistics Canada, increased debt since 1984 can be attributed to lower interest rates. That trend has been growing mainly since 2002.

Between 1984 and 2009, average household debt in Canada more than doubled. As a result, in 2011, the debt-to-after-tax income ratio for households in general is more than 148%. In other words, for every dollar earned, Canadian families owe roughly \$1.50 on average. Between 2007 and 2009, the debt-to-asset ratio rose to the highest level in 35 years.

What is clear is that the existing government measures have done nothing to reduce debt. On the contrary, low interest rates have contributed to the rising debt levels of Canadian families. That is unacceptable.

We know that social inequalities make the situation worse. Consider, for instance, the thousands of single-parent families whose monthly payments average over 40% of their income. This debt only increases with age, which is even more worrisome. Think of the thousands of households that are struggling just to pay the monthly balance on their bills. There are also people with low incomes living in neighbourhoods where the property values are increasing, so they are being forced to move, thereby isolating themselves.

Of course, education levels are a very important factor when it comes to debt. According to Statistics Canada, between 1999 and 2005, the debt levels of secondary school graduates increased on average by 55.8%. The NDP is not inventing these figures. These figures are from Statistics Canada. These are real, absolutely irrefutable figures. Unfortunately, the more one is educated, the more debt one tends to carry during that time.

The question is this: how can the government, which claims to care about the future of Canadians and our children, justify its inaction when it comes to the growing debt load of families?

As for pensioners, the median value of their mortgage or consumer debt is \$19,000. Of those who have debt, 17% owe over \$100,000. The situation gets worse as these people get older. There are some people who are still paying back their debts at the age of 70.

The question I would like to ask the government, once again, is this: what is it waiting for to introduce mechanisms to protect families against these unacceptable debt levels right now?

● (1820)

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to tell the hon. member for Saint-Jean that what we are waiting for is for the NDP to vote with us on the measures we have proposed to protect Canadians.

[English]

We clearly do not want Canadians overextended and that is why we are ensuring Canadians can make informed financial decisions. We are taking steps to improve financial literacy. We introduced credit cards reforms to ensure Canadians had the information they needed. We cut taxes and created the tax-free savings account to encourage Canadians to save for their future. We strengthened mortgage rules to protect Canadians buying homes.

We also constantly monitor the housing market, ready to take steps to ensure its ongoing stability. That is why we took prudent and sensible action to strengthen Canada's housing market earlier this year by reducing the maximum mortgage period to 30 years, significantly reducing interest payments Canadian families would have to make on their mortgages. We also lowered the maximum amount lenders could provide when refinancing mortgages to 85%. Withdrawing taxpayer backing on home equity lines of credit provided by lenders was also an advantage. Our sensible measures will help sustain the housing market and economic recovery.

Moreover, our Conservative government also recognizes that the best way to support the economic well-being of Canadians is ensuring we have a strong and growing economy through more trade and lower taxes.

[Translation]

While our Conservative government is focusing on creating jobs and growing the economy with its low-tax plan, the NDP is publicly calling for tax hikes, which would take a larger share of Canadians' hard-earned money.

We know that the NDP wants to impose job-killing tax hikes on Canadian employers to the tune of \$10 billion during a time of global economic turbulence.

NDP members publicly attacked our Conservative government because it reduced the GST from 7% to 5%. They bemoaned the fact that Canadian families were keeping more of their own hard-earned money.

Listen to what the NDP said about this. The member for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques said that cutting the GST was probably the worst measure that this government could have adopted. The NDP member for Beauport—Limoilou said that reducing the GST was a serious problem and that reducing the tax burden meant that the government would lose a significant part of its tax revenues.

The NDP plan is clear: higher taxes and irresponsible spending.

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Canadians and our economy cannot afford the NDP's job-killing economic plan. The NDP's high-tax plan is yet another disturbing indication that the NDP is not fit to govern.

In conclusion, I would like to mention that the NDP has just returned from Washington, where it made proposals that will kill jobs here in Canada, where hundreds of thousands of people are employed in the oil sands. That is deplorable. I urge my colleague opposite to support our plans to keep taxes very low in order to allow Canadian families to pay their expenses.

•(1825)

Mr. Tarik Brahmi: Mr. Speaker, all I can say is that, as usual with the Conservative government, the answer missed the mark.

I heard the parliamentary secretary's arguments, but the question was not about the NDP. She told us what the NDP has said; it is not about that. We are talking about the government, and the NDP is not currently in government.

The parliamentary secretary spoke about TFSAs. However, when people do not even have the means to pay their debts, how can they invest or save money? As usual, the government did not answer the question. She talked about creating jobs, but this government is creating low-quality, low-level, low-paying jobs that do not allow Canadian families to pay their debts.

Once again, the question is not about the government's criticisms of the NDP, but about what the government will do, now that it is in control and has the power, to reduce the debt burden of Canadian families.

[*English*]

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Mr. Speaker, once again, the NDP is missing the entire premise of the next phase of Canada's economic action plan. This is a low tax plan, for jobs and growth. This is the plan that will continue on the vein that we started to reduce taxes that Canadian families are paying so that they have more money to spend on the things that matter to them, the things that they need, the things that keep them thriving and keep them safe and sound in their home communities.

I want to mention that the member referenced the certified general accountant's report last June in his original question, but I am not sure he read it completely, or at all. If he did, he would have read what the report said about the ways to improve the state of household finances, especially a pro-trade agenda, not the anti-trade NDP agenda.

I am going to read from that report:

International competitiveness is becoming critically important for the success of Canadian business and, consequently... growth of individual investment incomes.

I would remind the NDP how important trade is to this exporting country. The NDP has to stop this anti-trade, anti-Canada agenda.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Just a reminder to hon. members that during the adjournment proceedings debate, they are welcome to take any seat in the chamber that they choose. It is not necessary to speak from the same seat that you usually take in normal proceedings.

[*Translation*]

CANADA POST

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, since it came to office, the Conservative government has considerably weakened the federal government's ability to ensure that Canadians receive quality public services by making draconian cuts in its budget. In October, the government continued along the same path by irresponsibly cutting the working hours of the country's rural post offices. Not content with interfering in the postal workers' fundamental right to free collective bargaining by ordering them back to work last June, the government is now cutting their hours of work. This policy of fiscal restraint will have a significant impact on the quality of rural postal services across the country and on the quality of life of postal workers.

But the effects will be felt in Quebec, which has clearly been targeted by the government. According to figures obtained by the Canadian Postmasters and Assistants Association, as of October 2011 approximately 165,000 hours of work had been cut in all rural post offices in Canada. Of this, more than 95,000 hours were cut in Quebec alone. Even though Quebec has approximately 24% of the Canadian population, the cuts in Quebec represent nearly 60% of the hours cut in Canada. And that is just the beginning. Other waves of cuts are expected in the coming months.

In recent weeks I have asked for explanations about the cuts targeting Quebec. The answers I was given were evasive. The government tells us that postal services are important and that it cares about protecting rural communities. It even had the audacity to tell us that postal services are guaranteed in all regions, without discrimination. These vague answers show at least one thing: there is no argument to justify the unfair treatment of Quebec on this issue.

Canada Post's responses are no more satisfying. According to Canada Post, cuts in Quebec are justified by the fact that the province supposedly experienced fewer cuts than the rest of Canada in the past few years. We have tried unsuccessfully to obtain the relevant statistics to verify this statement but they are considered to be confidential information. For now, it is difficult to believe Canada Post's explanations, particularly since, according to the statistics we do have, Quebec also experienced significant cuts in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

I would like to end on an intriguing point. I am talking here about the lack of consistency between what the Conservative government says and what it does. During the last election campaign, the Conservatives played the "power to the regions" card by promising, among other things, to create jobs in the regions. During that election campaign, the hon. member for Mégantic—L'Érable said that the Conservative Party would ensure that the regions finally had a voice in Ottawa. I do not know what strategy the government intends to use to create jobs but cutting the hours of postal workers in rural areas seems to be a peculiar way of trying to achieve that goal.

The hon. member for Mégantic—L'Érable was certainly right about one thing: the regions do have a voice in Ottawa but it is thanks to our party that they do.

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● (1830)

[English]

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Minister of State (Transport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the member's opening comments. I would like to remind the member that it is this government that created 600,000 jobs since the start of the global recession. It is this government that is creating jobs. It has policies to continue creating jobs. Canada continues to outperform all our equal trading partners.

For the member to criticize this government for our job creation policies is very rich especially considering the fact that his party, the NDP, moved to stop Canada Post from returning to delivering mail this past spring in a historic and terrible filibuster which not only affected Canada Post, but also affected our economy.

It embarked on a policy that not only affected Canada Post, but also damaged the Canadian economy in a fragile recovery. That is quite irresponsible of the other party. The delineation between the opposition and the government is quite clear for people who are watching this evening. The government creates jobs and implements policies to improve job creation. It ensures that fundamental components of our economy like postal delivery occur. The opposition party would like to stop postal delivery as demonstrated this past spring and has caused a lot of damage to the economy.

Canada Post has an obligation to provide affordable postal services to the people of Canada, not just for the foreseeable future, but for decades to come. Canada Post's immediate challenges have been well documented. Mail volumes have fallen by 17% per address since 2006 and the company is struggling with a huge pension solvency deficit of \$3.2 billion.

It is no secret that many of the challenges Canada Post faces include: declining letter mail volume due to Internet substitution, high cost of maintaining a network to service all Canadians, rising labour costs, huge pension obligations, threat from rapid technological change and shifting customer habits.

As Canada Post is taking the necessary steps to ensure its future success, the corporation has invested \$2 billion to modernize the postal system and replace outdated technology and infrastructure. These investments will allow Canada Post to take advantage of upcoming retirements to reduce the size of its workforce through attrition. The company has also reduced its non-unionized workforce, composed mostly of managerial jobs at head office, by nearly 15% since 2008, as part of its broad cost control efforts.

We are committed to ensuring that Canada Post is economically viable. While Canada Post operates at arm's-length from the government, it has assured me it will honour any and all collective agreements through this modernization initiative.

Mail volumes are rapidly declining, revenue from retail post offices is dropping and fewer customers are making purchases through Canada Post. All this has caused peaks and valleys. Any change in work hours is purely the result of the economic realities.

I hope this helps the member opposite to understand the challenges Canada Post faces and the adjustments it is forced to make as the economy changes rapidly.

● (1835)

Mr. Jamie Nicholls: Mr. Speaker, it is clear the Minister of State for Transport is stuck in the past. He always wants to discuss matters that occurred in June. I am talking about the cuts that are happening now and that are going to happen in the future.

[Translation]

The minister demonstrated on a number of occasions that he is not familiar with his own portfolio. He would rather talk in ideological terms than really get to know his portfolio and give real reasons for the cuts. The facts remain that the hours have been reduced and that Canada Post is making a profit.

[English]

Of course there are declines in service. When hours are cut and post offices are inaccessible, of course people will not be able to use the services that are inside the post offices. It is a bit rich for the government to argue that people are using the postal services less when Canada Post is making it harder and harder to use these postal services.

The post office in rural communities is an institution. It is something that links the community together. We can talk about modernization schemes, but the fact remains that people in rural communities love their post offices. The government is menacing them in trying to get rid of post offices by using strategies such as cutting hours and making services difficult to acquire.

I would like to end on the note that I have not really heard any real responses from the government side and I hope that the Minister of State will study his dossiers better.

Hon. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, the member needs to understand the bigger picture. He is not up to date on the file. It is he and his party who are hypocritical on the issue.

What happened in the spring is relevant because it accelerated the decline in mail volume. It accelerated the challenges that Canada Post faces because more people and companies shifted to email and e-commerce. That is why in areas such as Quebec and elsewhere throughout the country Canada Post had to adjust its hours.

The NDP needs to understand that when a decision is made there is a long-term effect. It does not just affect the present. That is why the government is good for the people of Canada and why the NDP is not prepared to govern. It is not ready for prime time and Canada Post is a prime example.

● (1840)

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it has been 59 days since the MV *Miner* landed on the shores of Nova Scotia on Scatarie Island. It has been about a month since I stood in the House and put a question to the Minister of Transport, which is why we find ourselves here tonight with the Minister of State for Transport.

Adjournment Proceedings

Over the four minutes that we have allocated during adjournment proceedings, I would like to ask the minister two questions.

The first question is with respect to the liability surrounding the MV *Miner*. Who is responsible for the removal of it?

Federal officials from the Department of Transport and the Coast Guard have said that they believe their responsibilities have been fulfilled. When I asked the question in the House, that was certainly the approach that the minister had taken in response to my question.

I also want to thank the Minister of State for taking the time to meet with the delegation that came up from Cape Breton, Premier Dexter and two MLAs, Geoff MacLellan and Alfie MacLeod. There was an indication given that there may be room for the federal government to help.

Time is of the essence. The frustration here revolves around determining who is responsible so that whoever that is can start working toward a plan.

If the federal government is not responsible, it is important that the premier knows that so he can start drafting a plan and determine where the federal government can help out.

I would ask the Minister of State to identify that.

The second question is with respect to the regulations. We know that the regulations are far too loose. Certainly, when we were in power we did not address this. Obviously, a case such as this really flags the issue of the loose regulations around towing.

The federal government licensed, permitted and set the regulations for towing the ship up through the Great Lakes. Once it was out in the ocean, it landed on the shores of Nova Scotia because a line was cut. It became Nova Scotia's responsibility. However, throughout that event, the process was a federal responsibility.

It is not uncommon in this salvage industry for people to get together and form a numbered company, bid on a job, pick up the wrecked ship and tow it to a salvage yard, at which point it is insured. Once it is cut loose and ends up on the bottom of the ocean under 300 or 400 feet of water, it becomes an insurance issue and the insurance money is collected.

Unfortunately for the salvage company, this time it did not go to the bottom of the ocean. Rather, it landed on the shores of Nova Scotia. Therefore, I believe that Nova Scotia will be faced with cleaning up this wreck, which some people are saying will cost \$24 million.

My first question for the Minister of State is quite straightforward. Who has the bottom line jurisdiction responsible for cleaning up this particular wreck? The second is, will the government move forward on tightening up the regulations with respect to the salvaging of abandoned ships?

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Minister of State (Transport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for raising this issue. He is correct that we had a very thoughtful and thorough discussion with the premier of Nova Scotia and members of the opposition party in Nova Scotia. I would like to use this opportunity to thank the premier of Nova Scotia for meeting with me. I was meeting with

him on behalf of the Minister of Transport who was doing important work in Montreal.

The quick answer to the question is that the person or entity that is responsible is the owner of the vessel.

The second part of the question was whether or not we are going to look at what to do in future cases. I think that is definitely something that we need to do.

Let me elaborate a little more. The mandate of Transport Canada is to promote safety in marine transportation and to protect the marine environment from damage due to navigation and shipping activities. In the case of the MV *Miner*, Transport Canada is investigating the incident to determine if there was compliance with legislation and regulations under the authority of the Minister of the Transport.

The owner of the vessel is responsible, as I mentioned, for its movements, including removal from a place that is not the property of the vessel's owner if it becomes stranded or wrecked. In the case where the vessel's owner is not known, a person designated by the Minister of Transport could act as receiver of the wreck to protect the owner's interests and to deal with any salvage or property claims that may arise. In this case, however, the owner is known and, as such, is responsible for the removal of the vessel. Therefore, it is the owner's responsibility.

It is Transport Canada's understanding that in the early stages, a tug company made several unsuccessful attempts to move the vessel from the beach. The owner contracted a salvage company to remove some of the pollutants, and the Canadian Coast Guard removed the remaining pollutants.

Since being notified of the grounding of the MV *Miner* on September 20, 2011, Transport Canada, the Canadian Coast Guard, and Environment Canada staff have been working collaboratively, in consultation with the provincial representatives, to address the respective federal responsibilities related to this incident. Transport Canada and the Coast Guard are in regular contact with the Government of Nova Scotia to make sure that there is thorough communication and that expert advice and opinions are provided where possible.

Transport Canada's national aerial surveillance program has been conducting regular over-flights to monitor the vessel and identify any marine pollutants from it. The Coast Guard is involved. We are also providing advice to the province, including issuing a safety advisory through local media and the Canadian Coast Guard to alert people of the dangers from this vessel. We have also provided advice to the province on the removal of the material from the vessel.

I know I am running out of time. Perhaps I will use my second minute to answer any more questions that the member has on this important issue.

• (1845)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I enjoy adjournment proceedings because there is actually an opportunity to get an answer. The minister has provided an answer, although I like his second answer more than his first, the fact that the regulations are going to have to be changed.

Adjournment Proceedings

Let me ask a supplemental question then, because what I drew from his answer was that the federal government believes that this is a case between the Province of Nova Scotia and the owner. If the owner does not have adequate insurance, if the owner is a shell company and we are chasing ghosts, that is a whole other matter. However, we have to get to the nub of the issue and who is responsible for what.

Does he believe that it is between the Province of Nova Scotia and the owner? That is what I drew from his initial response.

Hon. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for the opportunity to discuss this.

In regard to Transport Canada's involvement, it is investigating the incident for compliance with legislation and regulations under the authority of the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. The investigation involves both the MV *Miner* and the tug *Hellas*, which was towing the MV *Miner* at the time the incident occurred.

Transport Canada is also assisting the Canadian Coast Guard, the lead agency dealing with the threat of pollutants. Of course, we are dealing with marine expertise from all levels of government, across government. Transport Canada is also using aerial surveillance to keep an eye on the situation. We are looking at legal recourse and that is under investigation at present.

I look forward to working with this member and the Province of Nova Scotia on the second part of the member's question, which deals with what to do on a go-forward basis in this type of situation.

● (1850)

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:51 p.m.)

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