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—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, March 5, 2012

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1105)

[*English*]

FINANCIAL LITERACY

The House resumed from November 15, 2011 consideration of the motion.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will begin by underscoring that we are supportive of this motion. I have worked very closely for some time with the member for Edmonton—Leduc and I am pleased he is bringing it forward.

It bears mentioning, so that folks can recall what is in the motion, that this is Motion No. 269 and it reads:

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should help improve financial literacy in Canada by: (a) working to implement the recommendations of the Task Force on Financial Literacy; (b) creating, promoting, and continuously upgrade a single source website for financial literacy to increase public awareness and ease access to information for Canadians; (c) requiring federally regulated financial institutions to publicly disclose their contributions to financial literacy initiatives; (d) ensuring the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada works with willing provinces and territories to promote financial literacy to youth through the educational system; and (e) designating November as “Financial Literacy Month”.

When we look at the recommendations of the task force on financial literacy, there is no doubt that they are helpful recommendations. We are talking about recommendations to enhance and spread financial literacy through a wide variety of communities in Canada.

There is no doubt, particularly at this time, given the record debt loads under which Canadian families are suffering, that having this sort of widespread work to ensure that Canadian families are acutely aware of their financial alternatives is something all members of the House would share.

I would like to disagree with the government, not the member, on one point and then I would like to test the government itself on the issue of financial literacy, given the criteria that were put forward by the task force on financial literacy.

First, the government seemed to indicate in the House in the past that somehow Canadians were to blame for record levels of financial

indebtedness. In fact, as I know hon. members are aware, Canadian families have never lived under the degree of debt that they are suffering under today. However, surely this cannot be blamed on hard-working Canadian families. Canadian families are working harder and harder with fewer and fewer means. It has been said a number of times in the House, and it is a truism, that, under a Conservative government, most Canadian families are poor.

In the last year, the real income of most middle class and poor Canadian families actually went down by 2%. Therefore, it is not surprising, when we look at the overall poor quality of jobs being created, most of them being part-time or temporary in nature, and the kinds of jobs that this economy and the government has lost over the last six years, that 400,000 high end manufacturing jobs that have been lost over the past few years. Any jobs that have come into the job market pay about \$10,000 a year less than the jobs that have been lost.

When we look at all of that key criteria, the fact that the jobs the government has created are precarious jobs, part-time and temporary overwhelmingly, that they pay \$10,000 a year less than the family sustaining jobs, the full-time jobs, the manufacturing jobs, the value added jobs that existed in the economy before, we cannot blame Canadian families for coping as best they can with what has been a series of government policies that have made Canadian families poor. That is a simple reality.

On this side of the House, we do not share the notion that somehow Canadian families are to blame for record levels of debt, when it has been government policies, a deliberate pushing down of salaries and a variety of means that have replaced good jobs with poorer quality jobs. Those are the factors we need to look at when we look at the overall crushing level of debt that Canadians are experiencing, and this is historic. We have never in our history experienced the level of debt that Canadian families are bearing now, the yoke that Canadian families from coast to coast to coast are bearing.

I will come back to the task force on financial literacy, as well as the overall strategy on financial literacy, and measure the government against the criteria and priorities that were set out in the proposed national strategy on financial literacy.

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The first priorities are shared responsibility, leadership and collaboration. In September, we saw a federal government that was not being collaborative or sharing responsibility with the provinces in terms of funding health care. The government threw a bomb on the table in a meeting with the financial ministers in Victoria in December when it unilaterally imposed what will be less funding for the Canadian health care system, which will impose a greater burden on all the provinces.

When we talk about these priorities, the shared national strategies, responsibility, leadership and collaboration, we need to know how the government is faring in its collaborative approaches with the municipalities. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities has indicated a crushing infrastructure deficit that the municipalities are bearing with a \$120 billion shortfall. This means that the municipalities are struggling more and more to put into place programs with 8¢ of the overall tax dollar to repair the infrastructure, the roads and bridges which, in many parts of the country, are crumbling. Therefore, on shared responsibility, leadership and collaboration, I think we need to give the current government an F in all cases.

I will now move on to the third priority, which is lifelong learning.

Since the Conservative government has come to power, it is interesting that each year budgetary projections have been more and more out of whack with what the actual fiscal returns have been at the end of the year. We are seeing a government, far from using its lifelong learning to have more accurate forecasting and provisions around financial accountability, it is seemingly getting less and less accurate. So much for lifelong learning, the third priority of the proposed national strategy. Very clearly, there as well we are seeing a failing grade.

We then have delivery and promotion. We have seen in this House the cost of the F-35s, a contract that was untendered. They were supposed to cost \$9 billion, which escalated to \$20 billion and is now over \$30 billion. Nobody on the Conservative side of the House actually knows what the total cost of the F-35 program is. Hopefully, we will get some answers soon. However, when we talk about the delivery of financial literacy, ensuring that we have accurate predictions around financial expenditures that the government is undertaking, we have a case example of the government doing very poorly.

We have the prison program, at a time when the crime rate is falling, and the government has no idea what the overall costs will be. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has put some figures forward that clearly contradict the rudimentary number crunching of the Conservative government. As well, some very credible organizations have estimated the entire cost at over \$19 billion. Very clearly, on delivery, it is a failing grade again.

Finally, I will talk about accountability. We learned a few weeks ago that the President of the Treasury Board was looking to hide the cuts that may take place in the budget being delivered on March 29. We have a Treasury Board and a government that is attempting to hide what should be the facts of the extent of the cuts and what the impacts would be on service delivery for hard-working Canadian families who depend on those services. We are seeing here again that

the government is saying that it will not disclose that information, that it will cover it up.

The irony is that, while we talk about the private member's motion, which we support, and we look at the task force on financial literacy, on the priorities of the national strategy, we see that the government has failed on every count. When we are talking about financial literacy, who could learn most from the perspectives that were brought forward by the task force on financial literacy?

●(1110)

My colleagues on this side of the House would all agree that the government would profit most by putting in place those key principles around financial literacy, putting in place the priorities around the strategy for financial literacy, and ensuring that the practices it does now, which contradict financial literacy, are thrown out and it brings in new practices that would lead to financial literacy and financial accountability in our government and in our country.

●(1115)

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to take part in this debate today on Motion No. 269 brought forward by my hon. colleague from Edmonton—Leduc on financial literacy.

I will read the five components in the motion that my colleague is recommending:

—the government should help improve financial literacy in Canada by: (a) working to implement the recommendations of the task force on financial literacy: (a) creating, promoting, and continuously upgrade a single source website for financial literacy to increase public awareness and ease access to information for Canadians; (c) requiring federally regulated financial institutions to publicly disclose their contributions to financial literacy initiatives; (d) ensuring the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada works with willing provinces and territories to promote financial literacy to youth through the educational system; and (e) designating November as financial literacy month.

Those are all worthwhile objectives generally because there are things to be concerned about, whether it is helping Canadians pay for their education these days, which is getting more difficult as we see young people struggling with the higher cost of tuition let alone the cost of living as a student, or whether it is people who are trying to buy a house, manage their debt or save for retirement. There is a clear need for greater financial literacy in Canada.

All of us I am sure can think of times in our lives when we would have benefited from a better understanding of how things work in finances, such as understanding how to budget, how a mortgage works and how interest is calculated.

When I was practising real estate law, I found that people often did not understand the rules if they wanted to prepay a mortgage. If they were in a position at some point during the term of the mortgage to pay part of it down early or pay it all off, they did not know the rules ahead of time unless they were explained to them. I always took time to tell them what rules in the mortgage document would apply to them and the penalties that would need to be paid by them if interest rates had gone up between the time they signed the mortgage and received their loan and the time they were trying to pay it off. From the bank or lender's point of view, it would lose money because it would need to lend that money out at a lower rate and, therefore, would charge a penalty. People did not always understand that going into a mortgage. That is just one small example of why people need to understand financial rules.

Financial literacy is a vital component for our consumer protection regime. I would agree that the federal government should be taking leadership and working closely with the provinces and territories to improve financial literacy, especially among young Canadians.

It is important to note that what we are talking about here is a matter of education, a matter primarily within the responsibility of the provinces. In a sense, it is an odd issue for a member to bring a motion on. On the other hand, I am interested and pleased to have the chance to debate this issue as we are all concerned about what is happening with Canadians' finances, with their high debt loads, which I will talk about more in a moment.

There is, among other things, a growing need for credit counselling services across the country. That is unfortunate because it is often the people with high debt loads who have difficulty managing them.

The reality is that, under the Conservative government, household debt has soared to record levels. The debt of the Government of Canada has also soared. The Conservative government ought to learn some financial literacy itself when we consider that it inherited a \$13 billion surplus and, by April and May of 2008, about six months before the recession began, the government had put Canada back into deficit, which is a shocking fact. There is certainly a need for the Minister of Finance and others on that side of the House to learn some financial literacy.

A new record was set for household debt in the third quarter of last year. The average Canadian now owes \$1.51 for every dollar of annual income. That is a worrisome figure when we consider how much that has gone up in recent years. However, the measures proposed in my hon. colleague's motion are only the first steps in promoting greater financial literacy across the country.

• (1120)

When we think of literacy and education, there has to be a strong base for whatever kind of literacy we are talking about. That is why the Government of Canada ought to be investing in affordable early childhood education and in adult literacy programs.

For example, Senator Joyce Fairbairn has throughout her time in Ottawa been a very strong advocate for literacy programs across the country. I think back to several years ago when the Conservative government made substantial cuts. It gouged out a lot of funding from literacy groups across the country. That was a very short-

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sighted and unfortunate thing to do. Early childhood education is really important for our future. We know that children who get a head start, learning their ABCs and their 123s before the age of five, have a huge advantage. The records of people who have had that experience show they are far less likely to get into trouble with the law and far more likely to have a job throughout their lives because they had that good, strong head start.

We need to create a culture of lifelong learning. All of us can benefit from learning on an ongoing basis, of course. However, we have to make sure that all Canadians have the skills to manage their finances. There is a role that, with the provincial governments, can be played.

The government must also help people save for retirement. That is certainly a federal responsibility. It is surprising that older Canadians have been growing their debt loads at a considerably faster rate than younger Canadians. That is not what we would expect. We would think that those of us, say over the age of 50, would be less likely to be growing debt levels. This is an indication of how difficult people are finding it these days to prepare for retirement. It is very worrisome that older Canadians are growing their debt much faster than younger Canadians. What does that mean in the next 30 years when they are heading toward retirement age and the government is talking about increasing the age for the old age supplement and the guaranteed income supplement? It is very disturbing that people are having a tough time and yet the government is saying it is not going to help them.

We know, for example, that 50% of the people who receive OAS are making less than \$25,000 a year. In fact, 40% of them earn less than \$20,000 a year. These are not people who are well off. These people really need the help. To make them wait two more years is unconscionable. It is certainly not good for the future of the country.

In Canada, the average debt load in the past 10 years has increased twice as fast as income. That is a scary thought. However, the rate is three times as fast for older Canadians. Many older Canadians simply cannot afford to retire. They need all the help they can get. That is why the Liberal Party has proposed a voluntary supplemental Canada pension plan that would give Canadians access to a low cost, well diversified financial opportunity. I hope that members can see the advantage of doing that. People would feel much more comfortable knowing that they can have those retirement funds managed by the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, by people who have real expertise and great knowledge of the investment world, which is a mysterious place for many people.

The Conservative government has missed an opportunity. It failed to follow up on the report of the financial literacy task force in the last two budgets. It failed to protect consumers with the voluntary code of conduct the Minister of Finance negotiated with the credit card issuers and the banks behind closed doors. There is real room for improvement there.

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It concerns me that I heard the Royal Bank and the Toronto-Dominion Bank are planning to withdraw from the services of the banking ombudsman. Considering that that institution is already just a voluntary one, and not binding on the banks, to think that they are actually going to withdraw from that is very disturbing. I would hope they would reconsider that decision.

• (1125)

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss Motion No. 269, sponsored by the member for Edmonton—Leduc. In his decade-plus period of service to his constituents here in Parliament, the member has become highly regarded among his colleagues and observers across Canada, especially in his current capacity as chair of the finance committee. I was proud to serve as president of his constituency association. I am proud to vote for him as my own MP. I also applaud him for his work today in promoting and increasing awareness of an important issue affecting all Canadians, financial literacy.

That is enough sucking up to one of my colleagues. Today we want to talk about the motion that presents constructive ways to improve financial literacy in Canada. It is good news, and I appreciate that my colleague from across the floor mentioned it. We would respond to the recommendations of the task force on financial literacy. We would create, promote and continuously upgrade a single source website for financial literacy to increase public awareness and improve access to information for all Canadians. We would require federally regulated financial institutions to publicly disclose their contributions to financial literacy initiatives. We would ensure that the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada works with willing provinces and territories to promote financial literacy to youth in particular. As well, we would designate November as financial literacy month.

Everybody agrees that those are things to do, but surprise, surprise, the folks across the floor do not think we are doing it properly. Welcome to Parliament.

Our Conservative government supports today's motion, as we support improving financial literacy to assist Canadians achieve greater control over their own finances.

Our economy is built on the millions of financial decisions that Canadians make every day. More than 60% of total spending in Canada's economy, which is the lion's share of our economy, is consumer spending. Investment and consumer spending go hand in hand. They create jobs, growth and wealth. Improving financial literacy helps consumers act knowledgeably and with confidence in managing their personal financial affairs. That is why ensuring that all Canadian consumers have access to the right tools and the right information is so important. It will allow them to make choices that best serve their interests, especially younger Canadians.

As Steve McLellan, head of the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce recently observed:

...an element of the whole person certainly is the writing and the reading, but it's also to be able to plan their own life and manage their own [finances]...

A good foundation of financial literacy, including an understanding of personal budgeting and the impact of interest rates, can help our young people successfully manage their money now and build a higher quality of life in the future.

Whether it is a question of saving for retirement, financing a new home or balancing the family budget, improving the financial literacy of Canadians would add to our competitiveness, the stability of our financial system and the strength of our economy. That is why, as outlined in budget 2009, Canada's economic action plan, we put a plan in motion to build a cohesive strategy on financial literacy, starting with the creation of a task force on financial literacy. This builds on our government's already strong actions in this regard.

For example, in budgets 2007 and 2008, we provided the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada with new funding to undertake financial literacy initiatives, focusing initially on youth. This included a partnership with the British Columbia Securities Commission in developing *The City*, a web-based high school financial literacy program available across the country. This strategy of boosting the financial knowledge of Canadians goes hand in hand with our Conservative government's ongoing leadership to enhance consumer protection for Canadians using financial services.

For instance, to help out consumers of credit cards, we introduced measures in 2009 that require clear and simple information on credit card application forms and contracts, and timely advance notices of changes in rates and fees. Just today it was announced that we are taking action on unsolicited credit card cheques, something that is overdue. We also limited credit card business practices that are not beneficial to consumers. We established a 21 day minimum grace period for new purchases made with a credit card and limited some debt collection practices. These measures were widely applauded by consumer groups. The Consumers Association of Canada gave them high marks remarking, "they will address the key consumer concerns in the market without having unexpected adverse consequences for consumers".

A strong and stable financial system also depends on the ability of its users to make informed decisions. That is why our Conservative government launched the task force on financial literacy, to make recommendations on a national strategy to improve financial literacy in Canada. The task force delivered its final report in February 2011. We are working to implement many of its recommendations.

In fact, Bill C-28 is before Parliament as we speak. Bill C-28, the financial literacy leader act, responds to the central recommendations of that task force report by calling for the appointment of a financial literacy leader to spearhead the government's ongoing role in strengthening the financial literacy of all Canadians.

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• (1130)

While the task force acknowledged that excellent work was being done across Canada to improve financial literacy, more can always be done. In fact, the report's number one recommendation was as follows:

The Task Force recommends that the Government of Canada appoint an individual, directly accountable to the Minister of Finance, to serve as dedicated national leader. This Financial Literacy Leader should have the mandate to work collaboratively with stakeholders to oversee the National Strategy, implement the recommendations and champion financial literacy on behalf of all Canadians.

I believe that our Conservative government's outstanding record of promoting financial literacy and consumer protection would only be enhanced by this appointment which would coordinate our efforts to ensure that they remain effective.

As the task force report tells us, improving financial literacy in Canada will “require a focused, centrally recognized champion. Clear leadership and coordination are needed at the national level. Sustained, steady progress over the long term is unlikely to be achieved without dedicated stewardship”. I am confident that the appointment of a financial literacy leader would achieve these goals in coordination and bring us further to the worthy goal of the member for Edmonton—Leduc of improving financial literacy in Canada.

I spent 12 years before coming to Parliament as an investment adviser, stockbroker and branch manager. My wife and son are still in those roles. Most people are too busy to pay close attention to their investments. That makes sound financial advice very important. Financial literacy though, makes the average investor more comfortable with what that financial advice means.

If an investment adviser cannot explain an investment to the understanding of the average investor, then the investment is probably a bad idea. Sound and effective investing is not rocket science. Neither is financial literacy. It simply takes an effort by those giving advice and a reasonably informed investor. At the very least, people should read books like *The Wealthy Barber*.

Our government's commitment to financial literacy through programs that will be started as a result of Motion No. 269, and the expertise of a financial literacy leader will provide an important step forward for Canadian families. Statistically, only 51% of Canadians maintain a budget and 31% struggle to balance their books and pay their bills.

Let me conclude by saying that our government has shown its faith in the long-term effects of financial literacy on the well-being of Canadians and the Canadian economy by increasing funding of financial literacy initiatives on an ongoing basis. We remain committed to doing everything we can to help Canadians as they prepare for a healthy financial future. We are doing things almost on a daily basis. I just mentioned the unsolicited credit card cheques. We also took action today to introduce a mortgage code to help Canadians better understand what a mortgage means because that can be a fairly confusing financial transaction. Obviously, it is probably the most important or biggest financial transaction that most people will make.

I certainly applaud my colleague from Edmonton—Leduc for bringing this motion forward. It is one that I sense will be supported,

notwithstanding the typical rhetoric we get that is just part of this place and I understand that. I strongly recommend that all members vote in support of this motion.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to speak in support of the principle behind this motion brought forward by the member for Edmonton—Leduc.

There is no question that financial literacy is extraordinarily important for Canadians to be able to make fully informed decisions with regard to their financial futures. However, I would suggest that this motion is a half-hearted attempt by the government to move forward with an important initiative begun by the financial literacy task force, which brought down its report with recommendations two years ago. The best we have been able to get from the government after some considerable hard work and lobbying by the member for Edmonton—Leduc is a motion that talks about the government moving forward with good intentions. I would suggest, frankly, that it is not good enough.

We in this country are faced with a situation where the average family's debt load in the past 10 years has increased twice as fast as incomes, and three times as fast for older Canadians. It is important to bring that up because there is no question that understanding the rules of the road, the various financial vehicles, the terms and conditions of credit cards and various loans and mortgages, is important for all of us. At the moment, however, there is a situation in this country where older Canadians are experiencing debt levels at historic levels.

We have talked about this in the House over the past number of weeks and months, with the government contemplating extending the eligibility period for OAS from 65 to 67 years of age. I want to take this opportunity to bring to the government's attention the fact that seniors are already seriously struggling to make ends meet. There is an increasing number of seniors who, as a result of losing their jobs and of downsizing and poor health, are unable to work. The figures show that at the age of 62 there seems to be a bulge in the number of seniors finding themselves unemployed. They are piecing things together with credit cards and personal loans in trying to make ends meet until they reach the age of 65, when they are eligible for the Canada pension plan, GIS and old age security.

Understanding the implications of credit cards is not going to help those people because they are simply trying to cope. They are trying to keep their heads above water and maintain what they have. Being responsible contributors to their communities for their whole lives, they are not wanting to default or to go bankrupt, so they are trying to use every tool available to try to deal with their situation. This motion does not help them deal with that.

I absolutely support the intent of this motion to make available to Canadians, including to children and other Canadians throughout their lifelong trajectories, increased resources for financial literacy at all levels and to work with the provincial governments on that, et cetera.

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●(1135)

However, we have to recognize in this House that there are some very critical problems at stake that make understanding the problems associated with debt levels more important than simply understanding their terms. On a matter like credit cards, if the government would do what the former leader of the NDP, Jack Layton, talked about for so many years and bring in a cap on credit card rates, that single action would do so much for seniors and average Canadians trying to make ends meet.

I want to talk about the financial literacy issue specifically as it relates to the fact that 50% of adult Canadians, according to the task force, struggle with simple tasks involving math and numbers. Therefore, when we talk about putting information on a website or about sending information out in pamphlets or putting it on billboards, we have to recognize that over 50% of Canadians are having basic literacy challenges as it is. That fact needs to be taken into consideration when it comes to the means by which we deliver information on financial literacy. Forty-two per cent of adult Canadians struggle with reading, and 20 per cent of Canadian households do not have access to the Internet. Not only are there problems with literacy but at least 20% of Canadians also do not even have access to computers or the Internet. This issue needs to be taken into account when we consider how to move forward with things like literacy programs.

When I began, I said that this was a weak attempt at implementing some important recommendations of the task force. I want to highlight a couple of things the government could be doing right now and should have done already. Here are a couple of key recommendations.

First is working with the provinces and territories to integrate financial literacy into all levels of our education system, including primary, secondary, post-secondary and adult learning curricula. That is key, and it has to start now and start young.

Second, the government should be implementing financial literacy through key programs that already exist, including EI, OAS, CPP, the youth employment strategy, the urban aboriginal strategy and the immigrant settlement and adaptation program. Those are areas where the government has contact with many Canadians, some of whom are Nova Scotians, and an opportunity for it to present information in clear language so that people are more likely to understand it. I get a chuckle from that when I think about the problems we have been dealing with at my office in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, from people struggling even to get access to some Service Canada offices and dealing with the EI and CPP backlog and the fact they are only getting a recording on the phone and are having trouble getting a response.

Third, the government should implement a financial literacy component to the Canada student loan program for students receiving funding.

Finally, the government should intensify efforts to raise awareness with regard to financial fraud among vulnerable Canadians.

Those are key recommendations that the task force came up with. The government could and should have been moving on these

already. They are very specific strategies and I would urge the member who has moved this motion, which we support, to continue to work with his colleagues to ensure that very specific actions begin to take place on the important initiative begun by the task force and its findings.

●(1140)

Mr. Chungsen Leung (Parliamentary Secretary for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have an opportunity to discuss Motion M-269.

My discussion will centre around three topics: first, the need for financial literacy; second, the funding of the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada; and third, the task force on financial literacy.

I would like to begin by thanking the chair of the finance committee, the member for Edmonton—Leduc, for championing financial literacy in Parliament and for his leadership in Parliament since being elected over a decade ago.

As we have made clear over the past few years, financial literacy is a priority for our Conservative government, and we are taking action to help Canadians build these essential everyday life skills. We live in a world with a growing number of increasingly complex financial products and services, all with different rewards and risks, which may not be the easiest to understand. There are insurance products, mortgages, investments, online banking, savings accounts, loans, lines of credit, retirement savings accounts, cellphone contracts, debit and credit cards, and the list goes on and on. What is more, the list of products and services available to Canadians gets longer every year, making it even more difficult for busy families to stay on top of the risks, fees and potential returns.

In such a rapidly changing environment, financial literacy is vital for Canadians to make the most informed and best financial choices for their families.

Improved financial literacy means higher savings levels and lower debt. It gives consumers the tools and knowledge they need to pick the products and services that are right for them. As the Canadian Association of Credit Counselling Services recently declared:

By embracing financial literacy, individuals and families can discover a new sense of personal control and mastery over their financial matters.

I am proud of our Conservative government's commitment to improving the financial literacy of all Canadians. It is a commitment that we have honoured time and time again, through numerous pro-consumer protection measures and the legislation currently before Parliament to appoint a financial literacy leader and our continued support for the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada, also known as FCAC.

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In our efforts to help Canadians increase their financial knowledge and their confidence in managing their personal finances, our government has strongly supported the important work of the FCAC. Indeed, our Conservative government announced in last year's budget that the FCAC would receive \$3 million a year, in addition to the \$2 million a year already provided, to further support improved financial literacy initiatives.

FCAC, the government's lead agency on financial education and literacy, has introduced an array of excellent initiatives in recent years. In fact, a number of constructive initiatives are under way in Canada to strengthen financial literacy, with the FCAC playing a lead role. These include developing a financial literacy program for northern aboriginal communities and providing educational material about money and finances for newcomers to Canada.

FCAC has other innovative tools to help Canadians, such as mortgage calculators that quickly determine mortgage payments and the potential savings resulting from early repayments. It also creates innovative online information to help consumers shop for the most suitable banking packages for their needs.

Young people in particular are benefiting from the FCAC's financial literacy initiatives, a perfect example being an educational tool called "The City". This free, web-based interactive tool is designed to help young Canadians 15-to-18-years old acquire financial skills.

FCAC has also been instrumental in leveraging and coordinating private sector and voluntary sector initiatives already under way across Canada.

I would like to talk about the task force on financial literacy. Empowering people with financial know-how gives them the confidence to improve their access to financial services and enables them to choose the products that best meet their needs. Ensuring that people have the tools to make responsible financial decisions is important not just for their personal well-being but also for the strength and stability of our economy as a whole.

That is why our Conservative government established the task force on financial literacy to make recommendations on a national strategy to improve financial literacy in Canada. The task force has 13 members drawn from the business and education sectors, community organizations and academia. Our goal was not to impose a top-down strategy. All across Canada, there are excellent examples of financial literacy education at the provincial and community levels.

That is why our government sought to build on these individual good works by working together to further improve financial literacy throughout Canada. The task force delivered its final report, "Canadians and Their Money: Building a brighter financial future", last February 2011, outlining 30 recommendations to improve the financial literacy of Canadians aimed at various levels of government and stakeholders.

• (1145)

The report was met with widespread support. Indeed, the Certified General Accountants Association of Canada said:

We're delighted with the Task Force's report. We're pleased it recognizes and builds on existing efforts, stressing shared responsibility and cooperation.

The Canadian Foundation for Economic Education said that the task force:

—presented a series of recommendations that are reasonable and appropriate. If implemented, they should prove to be effective in significantly helping to improve financial literacy in Canada....The sooner the efforts proposed by the task force can get under way, the sooner Canadians can start to benefit from the learning opportunities these initiatives could provide.

I am happy to report that our government is currently acting on a key task force recommendation for the need for dedicated leadership by introducing legislation proposed to amend the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada Act to provide a framework for the appointment by the Governor in Council of a financial literacy leader. This leader would be responsible for collaborating and coordinating his or her activities with stakeholders who contribute to and support initiatives that strengthen Canadians' financial literacy and to continue the progress already achieved by the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada.

As Social and Enterprise Development Innovations recently remarked, the appointment of a financial literacy leader is:

—the first step in a process that could help Canadians make better financial decisions. It could also help Canadians better weather the economic storms that will inevitably blow through the global economy from time to time.

The financial literacy leader would be essential to our government's financial literacy efforts, but it is merely a single example of how we continue to boost Canadian consumers' knowledge and provide them with the tools they require in an increasingly complex financial marketplace.

In conclusion, clear and concise financial information and increased financial literacy supports higher savings levels and decreased indebtedness. It gives Canadians the information and therefore the power needed to select the financial products and services that best meet their and their family's particular needs.

The range of financial products available to Canadians is expanding rapidly and the complexity of such products can often make it difficult to fully understand the risks, fees and potential returns.

No matter our individual circumstances, improved financial literacy is vital to making sensible and responsible financial decisions. That is why I am proud to support the member for Edmonton—Leduc's private member's motion, which would help build on our government's commitment to improve financial literacy in Canada.

• (1150)

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank all the members of Parliament who spoke to this motion today and in November. I certainly appreciate all their thoughts and words on this.

Private Members' Business

We delved a little into financial literacy and fiscal policies of the government. It is certainly possible for there to be people who are financially literate but who disagree with the fiscal policies of the government. We ought to ensure that we are focused on financial literacy when members come to vote on this motion and also when discussing Bill C-28.

In wrapping up, I want to thank all of the individuals and organizations that have been working in this area for years. Most of them have been doing so on a voluntary basis. I have been amazed by the number of people who have contacted me by email or letter and who have come to my office to talk about the initiatives they have been working on. The non-governmental organizations have talked about the work they are doing in schools. They are bringing mentors into schools to teach young people about financial literacy.

In fairness, I should point out that people in the media have been doing a lot of work in this area. Many journalists have been writing about financial issues for years and making some real efforts to educate Canadians about financial literacy and to educate and inform them as best as possible in terms of making their own financial decisions.

I have to point out I received many emails, calls and letters after Jane Taber wrote an article in the *Globe and Mail* on this issue, much more than after the original debate in the House of Commons. I am somewhat surprised that she has a wider readership than *Hansard* on a daily basis, but I do tip my hat to her because that article certainly did cause a discussion nationally.

What has been driven home to me in discussing it with people is that there is a lot of effort being made out there and a lot of outstanding work, but there is a lot of duplication and overlap.

I want to emphasize the second priority of the task force report, which is leadership and collaboration. Why this is so important is there are so many people and organizations doing so many good things across the country that we need to have some collaboration with all of these groups. That is addressed in the motion in terms of having the one website portal working with the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada. It is also why leadership is so important.

I strongly encourage members in the House to do as the member for Edmonton Centre suggested, which is to vote for Bill C-28, because that is the first recommendation of the task force report. It is the very first recommendation and the one in my view which must be put into play.

I want to acknowledge the work of organizations such as the Financial Literacy Action Group. I will list the seven organizations for members' benefit: ABC Life Literacy Canada, the Canadian Foundation for Economic Education, Credit Canada, Financial Planning Standards Council, the Investor Education Fund, Junior Achievement, and Social and Enterprise Development Innovations. There are other organizations as well. The Economic Club of Canada has started an initiative where it takes students to the TSX or to another institution to teach them about financial literacy. It should be commended as well.

I want to thank the members of the task force, the chair, Don Stewart, and others. I encourage people to read the report. It is very readable. It is an excellent report with 30 recommendations and five

priorities. I encourage members to read the report and to work on implementing it as best we can. That is obviously the first point in my motion, which is to work to implement the recommendations of the report, to work toward a single source website for financial literacy, to require federally regulated financial institutions to disclose their contributions, that the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada curriculum be in schools, and to designate November as financial literacy month.

I take the point members have made in the House and others have made by email. This is very much about lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is one of the five priorities identified by the task force. This will very much be part of it. It does not simply stop at high school and leave people on their own. It is very much about lifelong learning.

I encourage people and members in the House to support this motion. I thank them for their words thus far. This is an increasingly complex world for all of us and we need to empower people. This motion on financial literacy is about empowering individuals, families and businesses so that they can make better decisions for themselves. I thank members for their comments and I hope they will support this motion when it comes up for a vote.

● (1155)

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time provided for debate has expired.

[English]

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): In my opinion the yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Pursuant to Standing Order 93, the division stands deferred until Wednesday, March 7, 2012, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

● (1200)

SUSPENSION OF SITTING

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The House will now suspend until 12 o'clock.

(The sitting of the House was suspended at 11:57 a.m.)

SITTING RESUMED

(The House resumed at 12 p.m.)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP) moved:

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should: (a) honour the service of Canadian military and RCMP veterans and their families by committing to not cut Veterans Affairs Canada in the upcoming budget; and (b) provide programs and services to all military and RCMP veterans and their families in a timely and comprehensive manner.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I thank the federal NDP for the opportunity to use one of our rare opposition day motions to highlight the very serious concerns facing our military and RCMP veterans and their families. I wish to inform you that I will be sharing my time today with the great member of Parliament for Québec.

The motion says very clearly that we are trying to help the Minister of Veterans Affairs maintain the fiscal budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure that all programs and services will continue and so military and RCMP veterans and their families will have access to those services right now.

It is no secret that the last few Fridays I have mentioned in the House the situation of 90-year-old Ted Shiner from Bedford, Nova Scotia, who was denied VIP service to assist him. Ninety-seven year old Louis Dionne, a World War II veteran from North Vancouver, was told that it would take up to 16 weeks to get an answer as to whether he was eligible for VIP service, the veterans independence program, that would help him with housekeeping and groundskeeping services. This would allow him to stay in his home longer. That is the current level of service. If the department is cut, future military and RCMP veterans and their families will have a harder time accessing the benefits and services they so richly deserve.

Dan Slack of the Veterans Advocacy group told me something that I thought was very poignant. We and the government say that we send the very best to Afghanistan. We give the men and women the best training, the best equipment and the best mission in the world to deal with the situation. That is three bests in a row, but when they come back and ask for services and benefits, they do not get the best. What happened? We send them over there and praise the fact that they are the best in all aspects, but when they come back, a lot of them end up homeless. A lot of them struggle to get the benefits they require.

Bear in mind, we are talking about the proudest, bravest and most honest Canadian citizens there are, including their families. Our best and brightest serve in the RCMP and military. Simply calling the 1-866-522-2122 number looking for help is a tremendous feat, admitting they may have a problem, either medically or psychologically. Instead of telling them that they require these forms and that

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we will get back to them in 16 weeks, we should be asking them, very clearly, how we can help them. We should be asking them what they need to get back on track. However, that does not happen.

I want to praise the front-line staff members of VAC. I have met many of them across the country. The front-line workers of DVA do an outstanding job with what they have and they deserve our credit. The problem is they are restricted on what they can give. Certain things have to go up the chain for authorization and in many cases military and RCMP veterans have to go before the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and that is the crux of the problem. This politically-appointed board, and very few members of which have any military service and none are medical doctors, adjudicate on behalf of the Government of Canada through DVA on cases before them.

We remember all too well the case of Steve Dornan from the Annapolis Valley in Nova Scotia, who fought for nine years to get the benefits he required because he had cancer, which the doctors and everyone else admitted may have been caused by his exposure to chemicals and depleted uranium during this tour in Bosnia. He had to go to Federal Court to get the DVA to admit that it was not qualified to adjudicate medical evidence because the members were not medical doctors. What did VRAB do? It sent it back to the minister of the day and just before the election, the minister indicated that Mr. Dornan could receive benefits.

● (1205)

Why would a hero of our country, a sergeant in the military who has cancer, not be eligible for benefits? His wife had to stage a sit-in in the office of the member for West Nova to get the attention of the government. They have already fought for our country once. Why should they have to fight again?

The motion proposed motion today did not originate from the NDP. It came from every veterans advocacy group in the country. The Royal Canadian Legion, The Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans in Canada Association, the National Council of Veteran Associations, the National Aboriginal Veterans Association and the Canadian Veterans Advocacy Group support the motion. Many men and women in the service, although they cannot say publicly, have called to support the motion.

Every veterans advocacy group supports the motion and they did so in writing to the minister, asking that the department be exempted from the cuts in the March 29 budget. It was not us, but we are advocating on their behalf in order to help the minister ensure that the current level of benefits to the services will be maintained.

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Later on members will hear the minister and others say that there will not be cuts to the programs and services to our current veterans. They may be correct, but the question is this. How do they get the service in the first place? That is the difficulty.

Right now the average case worker has over 900 cases with which to deal. Some of those cases are veterans with multi-injuries from psychological to severe physiological changes. Some have lost arms or legs and there are psychological injuries that create problems within families. They need an intensive amount of help, not just a “hi” and get passed on to someone else. They need time in front of someone in order to get help. Unfortunately, a lot of these case workers just do not have the physical time to do that.

Although I wanted to ask for an increase in the budget, my party said, no, that we would go with this and fight for further increases down the road. If we can maintain what we have, that is a start.

I know the Minister of Veterans Affairs in his heart of hearts truly cares about the men and women of our services, in the RCMP and their families. I know a lot of these decisions come from the Treasury Board. I would often like to put a prophylactic barrier around the Treasury Board so it would stop doing to Veterans Affairs what sometimes Veterans Affairs does to our veterans.

The men and women of our country deserve the best. When the department picks up their numbers, the only response should be: “How can we help you and what is it that you need?” However, that is not how it works. Many veterans are told they can appeal, but they just give up on those folks and do not appeal at all. Let us not forget that we have close to 750,000 retired service and RCMP personnel along with their spouses. DVA admits that it only looks after around 215,000. Therefore, two-thirds of that community is not being serviced by Veterans Affairs.

Many veterans have not called in for a benefit yet. Many have said that they tried, but the department said no and they gave up. A lot said that they were not going to go through two, three, four or five years of fighting only to be told by people, who are politically appointed to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, that this was their final decision and if they did not like it, they could always go to the federal court. It is a shame.

I could go on all day and occupy the time of the House, but I know other people would like to speak to the motion. However, I ask the Government of Canada, the Conservatives, to join with us and all the veterans advocacy groups on the motion to maintain the budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs so all veterans, RCMP veterans and their families will receive services in a timely and comprehensive manner. That is all we ask.

On behalf of my party, God bless all the men and women who serve and their families.

• (1210)

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to begin with offering my condolences to Marion Beetham. Wes, a Korean veteran, passed away yesterday. The reason I raise his name in this place is because Wes was one of those people who was served so well by Veterans Affairs and the people who looked after his health conditions, of which he had several. I used to speak to him regularly.

I was at a press conference with some people from PSAC, RCMP and military retirees on the issue of cuts. They were talking about how devastating it would be for the department if cuts were to proceed. Is there any indication at all that the government is listening?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Speaker, I know the Minister of Veterans Affairs is at least awake during this debate. That is quite an improvement over one Conservative member who was not listening the other day.

We know Ste. Anne's Hospital in Quebec is being transferred. There are 1,300 jobs, plus another proposed 500. That is a possibility of 1,800 jobs out of a department of 4,100, which is a proposed 40% personnel cut to the department. No other department in the country is facing that type of cut.

We think it is wrong. We hope the government is listening to the debate. I can only hope and pray that the government will do the right thing and vote with us tomorrow, at 5:45 p.m., in support of veterans and their families.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore would be well aware of the attempts that have been made to get the committee to talk about these budget cuts, which have been met with some mixed success. I also appreciate very much his reference to the front-line employees. He would know this from the veterans affairs committee cross Canada tour.

When Veterans Affairs Canada employees stand in front of the parliamentary committee, they dutifully, one might say robotically, repeat the talking points from the minister. However, when they get out in the hall, they say that they are very concerned about their ability to do their jobs and about the upcoming cuts.

I invite the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore to expand a bit on the pressure that has been put on the workforce within Veterans Affairs Canada.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Charlotte-town is absolutely correct. There are over 900 cases per caseworker and that can only increase with further cuts. The president of the local union that represents Veterans Affairs employees, those who provide the front line services, has said unequivocally that these cuts will have a serious effect on the men and women who they serve, who are the heroes of our country. Its members have said that, and they are the ones who deliver the services.

What we do not want to see is a downloading of responsibility for the care of veterans, RCMP members and their families on to the provinces. We have already seen that in the case of 90-year-old Sarah Atwood from Sackville. In the final stages of her life, she was denied access to a bed at the Camp Hill Hospital. Why? Because DVA said that she did not serve overseas in World War II. She did not dip her toe in the Atlantic, so she did not get access to a bed at Camp Hill Hospital, even though beds were available.

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I ask the Minister of National Defence this one question. When the last Korean overseas veteran dies, what happens to the 10,000 contract beds in the country that currently service them? The answer is the current personnel, the modern day veterans from 1953 onward, will not have access to those beds. That is a download to the provinces, and that is unacceptable.

● (1215)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my party for giving us this opportunity to debate a very important issue. I would also like to thank my colleague from Sackville—Eastern Shore, my party's lead veterans affairs critic, for his excellent work. He has been a member of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs for many years. All across Canada, particularly in Halifax, where we went recently, I have met people who recognize and appreciate the work he does. This motion is his latest effort on behalf of veterans. Our party is proud to support veterans. We believe in honouring the heroes who went where nobody wanted to go. They went proudly, and they rose to every challenge brilliantly. I think we can all be proud of that.

This motion is actually very simple. It would exempt Veterans Affairs from the government's budget cuts. All departments and agencies are expected to cut between 5% and 10%. We want to spare veterans, as other countries, including Australia, the United States and even Great Britain, did when the time came for them to cut their budgets. Those countries spared their veterans. I think that we should do the same thing. We must support them and show them that we do not want them to feel abandoned and alone in this situation.

This motion has the support of the Royal Canadian Legion and the ombudsman's office, which are very worried about the government's looming budget cuts. We hope that the government will not proceed with cuts that would affect the care and services provided to our veterans.

As we know, 90% of the Veterans Affairs budget is spent on benefits, services and programs for veterans. Therefore, any cuts to the budget would clearly affect those services and benefits. Some 70% of Veterans Affairs staff provide direct services to veterans. With very limited resources, they manage to provide all necessary care. Although much remains to be done, they address these challenges remarkably well with very limited means. If the Veterans Affairs budget is cut, the services offered and the staff who provide direct care will be affected.

Let us talk about cuts. The Minister of Veterans Affairs said he wants to cut red tape and make it easier for veterans to access these programs and services. Yet he also announced the transfer of Ste. Anne's Hospital, the last hospital dedicated to veterans' services. This will cut 1,800 jobs. This means 40% of the department's staff will be cut. And 40% is huge. It is unbelievable.

Furthermore, the government is saying that despite the budget cuts, it will maintain the same services, if not do better. That is impossible. That logic is absolutely absurd. Everyone knows that, except perhaps this government, unfortunately. That is why we are sounding this latest wake-up call, to ask all the parties to come together to adopt this motion on behalf of our veterans, in order to put an end to that.

After taking a closer look at the problems facing our veterans, we think it is appalling that veterans have such a hard time accessing programs and services. There is also a shortage of resources. According to the ombudsman's latest report, that is precisely where we should be focusing our efforts. Of course, there is a shortage of human resources, for instance, but the department does not have the financial resources needed to provide all services. Problems in terms of mental and physical health also need to be considered.

● (1220)

Far too often there are waiting lists. In that regard, allow me to say a few words about Ste. Anne's Hospital, which is considered to be a hospital for veterans, mainly those from the second world war and the Korean War. We know that their numbers are decreasing. However, a few beds—I can count them on one or two hands—have been reserved for young veterans. Not only would we like to have more beds for young veterans, but we have every reason to believe that more beds are needed because there is a waiting list.

There are no long-term services provided for our modern-day veterans, and that is a problem. That is what we need to work on, by deploying more resources and certainly not by making budget cuts, as this government is doing.

These cuts have an impact on the quality of the services provided and how quickly they are delivered. We have very few resources right now. The department is dealing with that, but it still takes far too long before a veteran is able to receive benefits. Sometimes we are talking about months, even years before veterans get their benefits. If the government were to cut staff and resources, that would obviously have a very serious impact on our veterans.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the great importance of conducting health research for veterans. There is a desperate need. Although the claimants may fewer in number than during World War II or the Korean War, the complex nature of the cases of today's veterans requires a certain number of resources that really must not be overlooked. We must not think that we need fewer resources. Quite the opposite is true. These modern veterans need more resources. Information must be obtained and research must be conducted on mental and physical health.

If I may, I would like to provide some context. A few months ago, during Veterans' Week, a number of veterans spoke out about this situation. In my riding, Pascal Lacoste stood up to denounce the fact that he was having difficulty receiving care, as were many other veterans. These veterans' actions at the time, during Veterans' Week, showed that from coast to coast to coast, throughout Canada, many veterans are having problems obtaining care.

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At that time, the Minister of Veterans Affairs indicated that he was aware that problems existed and that improvements needed to be made. He thus set up the scientific advisory committee on veterans' health. To date, we still do not know exactly what this committee does. We know that it has met several times. The minister promised that the first subject that the scientific advisory committee on veterans' health would address would be exposure to depleted uranium. He did this to reassure our veterans—including the veteran from my riding, Pascal Lacoste—and to let them know that this was important and that the problem would be looked into.

However, since that time, there has been complete radio silence. I was told to stay tuned. I remember asking a question, here in the House, to find out how all this was going to work, what the mandate of the committee was going to be and whether the committee would be tabling a report in the House, but we have heard nothing. There has not been any response from cabinet. It is absolutely shameful. This is a problem.

We are not going to abandon our veterans. We are going to push harder for more health research and more investments to support these veterans. We want to send a message to those who want to join the army: when they become veterans, we will not let them down. We will not leave them without care and services.

• (1225)

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I liked what the NDP member had to say, and I want to ask her a question. I support the motion, but I find it a bit vague. Can the phrase “provide...in a timely and comprehensive manner” be more specific? In my riding of Vancouver Quadra, a 90-year-old veteran waited one year for a specific service and, during that time, he was confined to his house. Is this considered timely? How could the motion be a bit more specific?

Ms. Annick Papillon: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member very much for the question because it highlights one of the problems that we have noted. Veterans, the families of veterans and Canadians who are worried about veterans may be watching us at this time. They feel completely alone. They do not know if they are entitled to services. They do not know why they cannot access services more quickly. All too often, they end up having dark thoughts that I will not mention here, which is completely unacceptable. It is unacceptable to let them struggle with all those thoughts. We are here and we can provide the services.

It takes effort to quickly provide quality services and programs for veterans. It is imperative that the budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs not be cut. We are not asking for more money for veterans; we simply want the budget to be maintained in order to ensure that they receive services.

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I must congratulate my colleague from Québec on her speech and her hard work together with my colleague from Sackville—Eastern Shore on the veterans file. Our veterans feel terribly abandoned and neglected. That is a disgrace.

This is not the only area in which the government has been negligent and adopted questionable tactics. Consider seniors, who are so swiftly referred to websites even though they do not have

Internet access. They also have a hard time figuring out which of the various programs apply to them.

It gets worse. All of this window dressing is just another way for the government to avoid providing services. The government wants everyone to see that services are available, but it does not help people benefit from those services. What does my colleague think of that?

Ms. Annick Papillon: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Beauport—Limoilou for his question. This government is planning to cut 68,000 jobs across the country, jobs that deliver programs and services. All departments and agencies, including Veterans Affairs, will be affected by cuts to programs and services. That is a problem. We hope that this will be a wake-up call for the government so that it understands the importance of reconsidering its position and supporting the motion.

I hope that all parties in the House will do the right thing and stand by veterans and all Canadians because we all know a veteran.

• (1230)

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is always a great honour for me to rise in this House of Commons to speak and an even greater honour when it comes to speaking about our veterans. To begin, I want to say to our veterans who are watching us and to their families that all hon. members, regardless of their political differences—there are always differences—want to salute them and thank them for everything they do for our country, what they have done and what they continue to do. Veterans are at the heart of our society and our democracy. All parliamentarians can say thank you to our veterans and their families for what they have done and what they continue to do for us.

It is an honour for me to speak as a member of a government that, for six years, has been putting its heart and soul into improving the quality of life of our veterans.

I want to commend the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore on his motion. I know that he works hard for veterans. He is an honourable colleague for whom I have a great deal of respect. However, I must point out that when it comes time to stand up in the House for veterans—and not just talk about them—by voting funding for them, with the exception of Bill C-55, the opposition members fail us, unfortunately. They are not there when we need them in the House to implement budget initiatives to improve the quality of life of our veterans.

[*English*]

As I just said, I certainly acknowledge the work of this member and the opposition regarding our veterans, as well as their great speeches today in support of our veterans. However, there have been times when I think those members had wished they had stood with our government and supported our new investment in veterans and their families.

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Unfortunately, time and time again, the New Democrats and the Liberals have voted against the veterans and against our budget initiatives. For that reason, I find it rich that the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore would bring forward a motion questioning our government's support and commitment to our veterans and their families, which is rock solid.

We have a motion in front of this House that deals with providing programs and services to all military and RCMP veterans. We are also serving RCMP veterans. I want to salute them today, including for their valour.

Our Conservative government has a record of investing in our veterans and their families. Let us be clear, as I have said over and over in and outside this House: we will maintain benefits to veterans, because we believe in our veterans. However, and let me be crystal clear, this will not prevent us from cutting red tape for our veterans.

Our veterans deserve a streamlining of the processes. Our government will keep on improving our processes and making this the hassle-free service they deserve. For this, I seek the support of the opposition. Are they willing to maintain the cumbersome red tape facing veterans?

I think we have an opportunity today to say clearly that we will maintain veterans' benefits but also make sure that we are making life easier for them when they deal with the government and Veterans Affairs. That is why in this form, the motion is not helping veterans. Our country must be there for veterans when they need us, and in clear and plain language. Of course, our government is committed to providing these men and women with the benefits and services they need and deserve.

I am very proud to hold the portfolio of veterans affairs minister within this Conservative government. My predecessors have gone to great lengths to improve the lives not only of our traditional veterans but also of our modern veterans, and their families as well. That is what this government is committed to, and why this government's record over the last six years is unprecedented.

Canadians have not seen such a commitment to our veterans since the end of the World War II. That is a fact. That is the truth. The numbers tell the same story, whatever the opposition might try to say.

First and foremost, we have been making significant investments in the programs, benefits and services that our veterans, our Canadian Forces members and their families depend on. Everything we do is a reflection of our commitment to supporting our veterans with the care they need, when and where they need it, and for as long as they need it. In the last six years, our government has consistently increased its budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs to improve the care and support we provide to our veterans and their families. We have increased the budget for the last six years.

Where were the opposition? They were opposing our budget initiatives. They were voting against our budgets. Which members supported our veterans, steadily and readily, in this House for the last six years? They can be found here around me, the Conservative members of this government. I want to thank every single member who has supported our veterans' initiatives.

● (1235)

Just last week, we demonstrated our commitment once again when we tabled the 2012-13 main estimates. These estimates provide Veterans Affairs Canada with nearly \$3.6 billion, an increase of \$44.8 million, or 1.3% of it overall annual budget shown in the main estimates.

[*Translation*]

Last week, we went back to ask for additional funds to ensure that our veterans have access to the programs and services to which they are entitled and which they deserve. Tomorrow, I will be appearing before the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs and I hope to have the support of opposition members to approve not only the supplementary estimates (C) required to close out the current fiscal year, but also the budget for next year.

Once again, as in the past six years, we are increasing our investment. Why? For a very simple reason: we are creating programs for our new generation of veterans.

[*English*]

Just a few weeks ago, I was in Winnipeg announcing the cutting red tape for veterans initiative. This plan will reduce cumbersome red tape and provide our veterans with the hassle-free service they deserve. That is why we need the support of the House to make sure that we are cutting red tape. That is why we need to change the motion to make the lives of our veterans better when dealing with our department.

As I said during the announcement, much of what is needed to make these improvements simply involves returning to the basics and overhauling how the department works. With that in mind, we are putting in place updated and more efficient technology to significantly reduce bureaucratic delays. We are modernizing the tools that our officials use when they are serving our veterans.

I want to raise the high profile of our officials working in the department. They are dedicating their hearts and souls to making the life of our veterans better. It is not always easy and not always perfect, but they are doing their best to make sure that the veterans get the best service they deserve in a timely manner and that they, of course, respect the rules to which they are entitled and under which they have to apply.

Therefore, we are providing our officials with a new tool called the benefit browser. This tool is aimed at helping our employees make sure they get information on all the services our veterans can receive.

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•(1240)

[*Translation*]

I announced our red tape reduction initiative two weeks ago in Winnipeg. This will ensure that our veterans have access to the services to which they are entitled in a more timely manner and with less red tape. I am very proud of this initiative.

We listened to veterans and the veterans ombudsman. They asked us to cut red tape and to communicate with them in clear and plain language. The work began a few years ago. The ombudsman has acknowledged that there has been some improvement and that our correspondence contains the elements for communicating with our veterans. Almost 41,000 letters a year are sent to veterans. However, there is a problem: the letters are often three pages long and can be difficult to understand because of the rather bureaucratic language.

We are therefore changing the way we communicate. We are improving it by providing reasons for the decisions rendered. That means that every letter sent to a veteran is divided into sections so that the veteran can understand the logical progression of the letter. What was the veteran's request? What is the decision? What is the evidence to support that decision? What factors, references, codes, regulations and tools allowed us come to that decision? How can veterans obtain more information or, if applicable, how can they request a review of the decision, sometimes with new information?

This is at the heart of the red tape reduction initiative. By communicating clearly and effectively with veterans, we will avoid many annoyances. Nothing is more insulting to a veteran, or to anyone for that matter, than to be sent a decision that he or she does not understand. That is why, as of two weeks ago, our department is communicating with our veterans in clear and concise language. I must say that we have already had very positive feedback from veterans. We are following up with them and we are receiving very constructive comments. Above all, this process is helping our veterans to better understand the decisions and avoid a certain amount of frustration.

[*English*]

Veterans are seeing a difference already with the consistent measures we are putting in place to make the lives of our veterans better. We have improved the response times at our national call centre and we are reducing the amount of paperwork veterans have to complete for many of the health benefits provided by the department. As well, with direct deposit now available for a number of benefits, veterans and their dependants are receiving their money faster and easier. That is why I invite the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore to support the amendment we will be putting forward because we want to make the lives of our veterans easier.

More than 41,000 disability benefit applications from veterans are presented each year and now we are responding in clear and plain language with the reasons for the decisions. We are moving forward and going ahead. We are cutting red tape, and this is only the beginning, because there are a lot of internal efficiencies we can make and many ways in which we can improve the way the government and the department are dealing with veterans. Are we getting support from the opposition to move forward and make the

lives of our veterans easier? That is what I hope because this is where we want to go.

Our government will never be satisfied with the status quo. We will not do things just because they have always been done that way. We are looking at ways we can improve. It is most interesting that those improvements are coming from the veterans and from our officials who know how we can make things better.

That is why in January our right hon. Prime Minister announced funding for another great initiative that, unfortunately, the opposition decided not to support. However, the opposition was alone because we got support from the unions, provincial governments, workers and veterans because this program is called "helmets to hardhats". The program is aimed at ensuring that military personnel who are leaving the forces can transition in a seamless manner into civilian life. This is a huge success. Everyday I receive calls from entrepreneurs who want to hire veterans. I hear from many groups that are willing to join in the helmets to hardhats initiative. We are ensuring that our veterans go into high paying jobs in the construction industry. Do members know who the winners are? Our country, our veterans and our economy are the winners.

We want to be on top of the wave when it comes to health, research and all aspects regarding our veterans' physical and mental health. Last December, I established the new scientific advisory committee on veterans' health. All veterans who want to get in touch with the committee can send an email to science@vac.gc.ca and they will be able to submit their information to the committee, which is working on health issues, the first one being depleted uranium. We are hearing the veterans, working with them and we are delivering.

That is not the only thing. Last fall, thanks to the leadership of this government, we announced significant enhancements to the new veterans charter which is at the core of our new program to meet the needs of modern veterans. Once again, we listened and took action with the committees, the Royal Canadian Legion and all the great stakeholders of this country. They told us that the charter that was initiated awhile ago did not go far enough. They said that it needed to be adjusted to keep pace with the care and support they required. It is a living document and these enhancements are doing just that.

•(1245)

Within the next five years, there will be an additional investment of \$189 million. I will be going to committee tomorrow to ask for additional funding because there is a strong uptake by our modern veterans into our new programs. We expect that more than 5,000 veterans will benefit from these programs. The accrued costs are \$2 billion.

Our government is investing in veterans. We are moving forward.

Business of Supply

[*Translation*]

I spoke briefly about the improvements to the new veterans charter. Obviously, we have achieved many things over the past six years, whether it be the creation of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman, the creation of the veterans charter or the broadening of the scope of many programs, including the veterans independence program. We are moving forward.

However, I had a bit of a problem with one thing that the hon. member said earlier in his speech, and that is when he said that he wanted to help me. And so, I actually found a way for the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore to help me.

[*English*]

If the member wants to help our veterans, he should support them, support our government, support our budget and support the amendment I am willing to bring forward.

• (1250)

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if only I had voted for the budgets of the Conservative government where all of these initiatives were hidden, we would not have a motion today and every veteran and RCMP member would be well taken care of and there would be no need for a 1-866 number. What utter nonsense.

It was the Conservatives who voted against the veterans first motion that the NDP put forward, which was passed by the majority of members in the House. On three separate occasions, the Conservatives voted against ending the unfair clawback of veterans' disability pensions as well.

The minister says that the motion is not really good. Is the minister willing to stand up, look into the camera and tell the Royal Canadian Legion, the Army, Navy & Air Force Veterans Association, the veterans ombudsman and all the other veterans groups out there that told him in writing and at the meetings last month not to cut from the Department of Veterans Affairs in the upcoming budget?

Will the minister, on behalf of the Conservative Party of Canada, be voting for our motion tomorrow, yes or no?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, veterans are the primary focus of our actions. I can assure the hon. member that we will make sure we have all the flexibility we need to improve our services to veterans.

[*English*]

I will be crystal clear. Not only are we maintaining benefits for veterans but we want to streamline and cut red tape. That is why I invite the member to support our motion to maintain our veterans' benefits. We need to ensure that we make their lives better.

Will the member stand up for veterans?

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, imagine my surprise when I heard the minister say that there have been consistent increases in the Veterans Affairs budget over the last six years.

The minister will be aware of a report prepared by Keith Coulter, a report over which there is a claim of cabinet confidentiality, a report that the disclosure of which has been denied by committee. The Keith Coulter report eventually made its way into the planning and priorities report and it advocated a \$226 million cut to the Department of Veterans Affairs this year. That was an excellent opportunity to take that \$226 million and reinvest it back to improve the services that are being delivered to veterans and to improve the benefits that are being offered to veterans. It was a missed opportunity.

For the minister to say that there have been consistent increases to the budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs is entirely inconsistent with the planning and priorities report of his own department and the secret Keith Coulter report. I would ask the minister to explain that discrepancy.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, the numbers indicate that for the last six years, this Conservative government has increased its investments in veterans and their families. That very member will have an opportunity tomorrow to support another increase in the investment of our veterans at the veterans affairs committee.

I would invite my hon. colleague to update his data and to look at the real facts. We have increased our investments not only over the last five years, but we will increase them for the next year as well. We support budget initiatives that make the lives of our veterans easier, such as the enhancements to the new veterans charter, and the helmets to hard hats initiative.

Will the member support the significant investments this Conservative government has been making for the last six years? He will have a chance tomorrow.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the response given by the Minister of Veterans Affairs to my hon. colleague's question. I am still waiting for the answer. Are we to understand from the minister's speech that the Conservative members opposite will be voting against the NDP motion?

• (1255)

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member from the province of Quebec for her question. We are proposing a clear amendment in order to maintain the benefits available to veterans. I am proud to invite all of my colleagues to support this motion, but I would like to say one thing. We will do whatever it takes to cut the red tape. I receive letters, emails and phone calls from veterans about this. When I meet veterans, they ask me to do something to make it easier for them to communicate with my department.

Does my hon. colleague agree that we need to cut the red tape? She has an opportunity to do so today by voting in favour of the amendment we plan to introduce to maintain the benefits and continue to invest in the services offered to our veterans.

Business of Supply

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let the minister be aware that there are hundreds of thousands of Canadians following this debate who are interested in knowing whether the government is committed to Canadian veterans. They are looking for a very simple answer from the minister with the motion that has been put forward.

The Liberal Party values the contributions our veterans have made to our country. We want the government to recognize those valuable contributions with resources through pensions and so forth that are provided to our vets.

Does the government support the motion that is being debated today, yes or no?

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, I have been very clear. We are supporting a motion that would be helpful and that would streamline our processes for veterans. No, we will not support a motion that would prevent us from making life easier for our veterans.

Will the member stand in his place and say that he supports an amendment that would make the lives of our veterans easier?

This government intends to keep on acting and delivering. The member had an opportunity to listen to my speech. We are investing in veterans like never before and we intend to continue to do so.

[Translation]

M. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, PCC): Mr. Speaker, for over six years now, I have been rising in this House alongside my colleague, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, to vote in support of veterans. Every time, I am thinking of my father, who served during the second world war, and expressing my unwavering support for the Royal Canadian Legion.

[English]

What does the hon. member think would help veterans more: the demagoguery coming from the other side or voting in favour of improvements to the lives of veterans?

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Ottawa—Orléans for his question. I would like to commend the remarkable work he does for his community, and particularly for the Royal Canadian Legion. I have had the opportunity to take part in events in his riding, to meet with students, for instance, all with one goal in mind: to ensure that we continue to improve the quality of life of our veterans.

His question is simple: does the Conservative government want to continue helping veterans? Of course. Is the opposition making up numbers? That seems to be the case today, since when we look at the reality, our government has invested more in veterans than any other government, and that is what we will continue to do.

[English]

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, at the outset, on behalf of my party and my leader, I want to thank the members of Her Majesty's Canadian armed forces and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for their service and dedication to Canada. I also want to thank the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore for bringing this motion before the House today.

The motion is timely as it relates to the unveiling of the federal budget at the end of this month. My friends in the NDP will certainly remember that day last fall when the Liberal Party presented a motion to the veterans affairs committee calling for public hearings into the cuts to the Department of Veterans Affairs. We presented that motion precisely out of concern that the Conservatives were going to continue with more cuts to the department, cuts that will harm our veterans and impact their services, cuts that will make it almost impossible for those who serve veterans to do their jobs. There was an embarrassing moment when the motion came up for debate. The Conservatives were opposed to my motion to have public hearings and voted against it. When the motion came up for debate at committee, some Conservative members did not show up on time for the vote. As a result, the Liberal motion passed. It did so thanks to the support of the NDP members who, I would point out, were on time.

As one might imagine, the Conservatives were very angry at losing a vote in Parliament. Instead of doing the honourable thing by accepting the democratic decision to have public hearings, they took revenge. At the very next meeting, without consulting anyone in the opposition, including me as sponsor of the motion and vice-chair of the committee, the Conservatives brought in their own witnesses who dutifully, one might say robotically, recited the talking points issued by the minister, "Nothing to see here. Move along. All is well. Services will not be impaired".

However, the minister's witnesses did give evidence that up to 500 jobs, not including the lost jobs due to the budget cuts or the transfer of the last veterans hospital in Canada, would be lost within the Department of Veterans Affairs. Once the Conservative witnesses had their say, they moved to an in camera secret meeting. They emerged from that secret meeting with a motion that shut down public hearings.

I share this background information to highlight the fact that the opposition parties and veterans groups have been on this issue for many months calling on the government to halt its cuts. However, it is not just Liberals or the official opposition who are concerned about the cuts to veterans. The vast majority of Canadians, including young Canadians, want to preserve the benefits and services we provide to our veterans.

Just this past weekend I had the honour of participating in the annual Prince Edward Island model parliament. These young people get it. They understand that veterans deserve respect. They had two days of debate, two days in which to identify their priorities and pass bills in their model parliament. One of the bills passed in those two days was the veterans tax act, exempting veterans from provincial income tax. That displays a deep appreciation from young people for the sacrifices our veterans have made for Canada. These are people whose great-grandparents, three generations removed from them, may know what it is like to be a traditional veteran. Many of them would be shocked to hear that the Conservatives are engaging in a process to cut money from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Business of Supply

If the example of our young people is not enough, let us consider what other countries are doing for veterans. The United States, which is in the midst of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, is exempting veterans from any budget cuts. Likewise, the United Kingdom, which also is in the midst of a terrible financial crisis, has exempted veterans from budget cuts, as has Australia. Canadians from all walks of life, from young people to seniors, are wondering why the Conservative government is not exempting Canadian veterans from cuts as well.

The parliamentary secretary and the minister, or whoever else is responsible for reading the Conservative roboscript, will say that the opposition is just trying to scare veterans. That simply is not true.

• (1300)

The proposed 5% to 10% cuts and the ensuing job losses at the department will have immediate and lasting impacts on the quality of service to our veterans. It must stop. The government must exempt veterans from cuts.

The minister's talking points repeat continually, regardless of the question posed, that veterans' benefits are statutory or quasi-statutory, meaning those benefits are automatic and not subject to yearly budget considerations. Again this is false. The fact is that the veterans affairs committee approves the yearly estimates. As the minister himself pointed out a few minutes ago, the money is allocated to the department by Parliament and the committee could at any time decline to authorize those amounts earmarked for benefits. Veterans' benefits are not guaranteed. They are discretionary. That discretion rests with the parliamentary committee and with Parliament.

As indicated, tomorrow the committee will deliberate on the estimates. The committee has the right and power to reject the minister's request for approval of additional funds. Again, the Government of Canada must exempt Veterans Affairs Canada from any budget cuts.

I want to disabuse another falsehood, that being the contention made by government that due to ongoing demographic changes in the makeup of veterans, almost all of the budget cuts will be achieved through attrition. Again, this is misleading. This really means that the Conservatives are on a death watch. They know that upward of 1,500 World War II veterans and Korean veterans, the traditional veterans as we call them, die each month. The Conservatives see the death rate as an opportunity to direct funds previously paid to veterans to other priorities, such as more politicians and bigger jails. If there are to be savings as a result of dying veterans, why would the government not invest those savings into providing better and more comprehensive services for veterans?

For example, it is disgraceful that a Canadian Forces member currently would receive upward of \$13,000 for burial costs should he or she die in service, and yet veterans, if they qualify, receive around \$3,600 when they die. For years the Last Post Fund has been pressing for an increase to no avail.

An uncomplicated application for a hearing aid from a veteran takes 16 weeks. In Halifax last week we heard from a family doctor who has restricted her practice to caring only for veterans. She has a patient who was recently released from the Canadian Forces. While

in the Canadian Forces he was in regular need of nerve blocks. After his release he was treated as any other civilian. The wait period for his nerve blocks is 18 months. This is wrong and it must change.

We also know that the department conducts a national client survey wherein it polls veterans with respect to how they view the services provided. These surveys we now know have very low participation rates among veterans and are now under scrutiny from veterans organizations. I had the opportunity last week to meet with the president of Our Duty, a wonderful veterans organization, which today released a comprehensive examination of how the department conducts its national client survey. People should remember that these surveys help guide the department in how it serves veterans. Suffice it to say there are grave concerns about the very methodology used. I invite Canadians to review the study conducted by Our Duty.

The point I am trying to make is that the notion the government can simply use savings from dying veterans to pay down a deficit which the government created is very offensive to veterans who want better, not fewer, services.

• (1305)

We know well the record of the government when it comes to cuts and providing services. My colleagues from Cardigan, Malpeque and Cape Breton—Canso all remember how Canadians were impacted when services were cut. We all remember how cruelly the Conservative government treated EI claimants this past Christmas, when thousands of Canadians who were expecting their money waited for weeks upon weeks to get their money, all because the Conservatives failed them by cutting staff and services. More recently within that same department, Service Canada, the online service for jobs seekers has been out of service for weeks. We need investment in services to veterans, not cuts.

Consider what great work might be achieved if the government invested, for example, in the veterans transition program at the University of British Columbia. This is a group-based therapeutic program that helps veterans make the difficult transition back to civilian life after physical or emotional injuries suffered in combat. This program is able to survive, thanks to the Royal Canadian Legion, not the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Here, the Department of Veterans Affairs could use the money it apparently is saving as a result of the death of traditional veterans to invest in programs such as this. This program works; the committee saw it first hand. It should be supported by government.

Business of Supply

Consider also the tremendous initiative led by Dr. Alice Aitken at Queen's University who, along with her team, has founded the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research, CIMVHR, dedicated to optimizing the health and well-being of our veterans and active military personnel through world-class research.

Does the government not think that providing financial support to these efforts might result in new understandings and treatments for such issues as post-traumatic stress disorder, and in doing so provide better services for our veterans?

Some Conservative backbench members of Parliament know these cuts are wrong and will hurt veterans. I wish they would stand up and be heard.

I will close by suggesting that in the midst of this debate on cuts, there really is a meaningful context. Just two weeks ago, I spoke in the House about the life of the last surviving World War I veteran. Her name was Mrs. Florence Green and she died this past September. She was 110 years old when she passed away. I expressed at the time how deeply meaningful it was to consider the sacrifice made by so many to fight tyranny and to defend the liberty, freedom, democracy and, yes, the right to vote without impediment. Tens of thousands of Canadians have given their lives for these rights. I really do believe that sometimes we forget that. We work and are busy with life and sometimes we forget that we really do owe our veterans a debt of gratitude.

I would end by just saying this, and I hope my colleagues will remember it: We say to all those Canadians who have served in our military in conflicts past and present, they have already made their sacrifice. They stood for us and now we must be there for them, and we say no to any cuts.

• (1310)

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Charlottetown, whose riding hosts the headquarters of Veterans Affairs Canada. This hon. member knows many of the people who work at DVA. He understands, just like anyone else, that the men and women who serve their country face an unlimited liability when they serve, and we as parliamentarians, regardless of which party, government or opposition, have the ultimate responsibility for their needs.

Dan Slack told me something very poignant today. He said that we send our very best over to Afghanistan. We give them the very best training. We give them the best equipment. We give them the best mission in which to pursue the goals that are asked of them. They are the very best. We hear that time and time again. Yet when they come back, they do not get the very best of services afforded to them if, indeed, they require help from Veterans Affairs.

Steve Dorman, whom the hon. member knows very well, was a sergeant in the military. He has cancer, possibly contracted from depleted uranium according to the doctors and specialists. Does the hon. member think it is fair that Steve Dorman had to go to Federal Court and fight nine years to finally get a benefit from the Department of Veterans Affairs? Alternatively, could he have received that benefit almost instantaneously if the department had given him the benefit of the doubt in deciding whether to help him and his wife? Does he think that is the way we should be going?

Finally, will the Liberal Party be supporting our motion?

• (1315)

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Speaker, there were a couple of questions and I will deal with the last one first, which was whether the Liberal Party would be supporting the motion. The answer is yes, most certainly. Here I thank and congratulate the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore for bringing this motion forward. He is well aware that we have been wanting a public discussion on the budget cuts for months. We tried to get that discussion to happen on the floor of the committee and were eventually shut down. This is a debate that is needed, welcome, overdue, and we will be wholeheartedly supporting the motion.

With respect to Mr. Dorman's case, the legislation calls for a veteran to be given the benefit of the doubt. The problem is that the interpretation of the benefit of the doubt within the department is not plain, which is what it should be on its face. That needs to change either by a directive within the department to truly give veterans the benefit of the doubt or a change in the legislation that would make it absolutely crystal clear that the present interpretation being given to those words is not what it should be. That would prevent the tragic cases my colleague spoke about, including of someone having to deplete his life savings and put up the fight of his life lives for nine years in court to get what is rightfully his.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for my colleague. The minister claimed there were no cuts. The Conservative member, however, for Ottawa—Orléans has said, "there may have been some cuts to veterans programs, but it can't hurt the dead".

My colleague made the point that many services were underfunded. At the time, I was on the Standing Committee on Health, where members heard about veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder who were unable to get the services they needed, that there were no clinical psychologists employed by Veterans Affairs Canada and that health human resources were woefully inadequate.

I would ask my colleague this question. What would be the impact on these needs if there were further cuts to Veterans Affairs' budget?

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Speaker, this has been an affliction within the Conservative Party since we started talking about budget cuts. It does not matter what the question is: the answer is that there will be no cuts to veterans' benefits. If the question is, "Will you be cutting the budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs, yes or no", the answer is that there will be no cuts to veterans' benefits.

What we have here is a play on words. There is absolutely no question, as we know from the evidence before the committee, that separate and apart from the budget cuts being discussed here today, there will be 500 fewer jobs within the Department of Veterans Affairs. That will affect services. The \$226 million that has been saved because of the death rate of veterans should be reinvested in understanding the more complex problems of the modern-day veteran.

Business of Supply

Therefore there is absolutely no question that cuts are coming. We can see it in the minister's reticence to support this motion. Cuts are coming and there will be an impact on veterans and those who serve them. People should not believe otherwise for a minute.

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, many in the House today, including of course the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore and member from Québec, have enumerated some of the most egregious cases of neglect on the part of the government. The government loves to whip Canadians with the stick of anti-patriotism and of our letting down our brave servicemen and women, and yet in Toronto, for example, we do have homeless veterans. There are many homeless people and among them is a community of homeless veterans.

I am wondering if the hon. member would like to speak to this issue and what it says about the government's real commitment to our men and women in uniform.

• (1320)

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Speaker, the veterans affairs committee did have occasion to visit a homeless shelter in Toronto, the Good Shepherd Ministries, and there is some excellent work going on there. While we were there, the minister sent an employee to tape-record the meeting. That is where the priorities are.

Within the Good Shepherd Ministries, the amount of money being invested by the Department of Veterans Affairs to help homeless veterans in Toronto is zero. There is an embedded employee, so there is an employee who physically has an office there instead of in some other building, but the problem of homeless veterans is real, it is here, it needs greater support and greater funding.

Support for this motion would be an excellent way to make a contribution to that problem, a contribution that is now minimal, if not non-existent.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will I am splitting my time with the member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue.

It is a great pleasure today to speak to the opposition day motion put forward by the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore. I want to start by recognizing the fact that the member has been a tireless advocate for veterans, despite some of the comments the minister made in his speech, asking him to stand up for veterans. That is exactly what he has been doing since the day he was elected to Parliament, whether it is in this opposition day motion or in the many private member's bills that he has brought forward for the consideration of the House, all of which have been opposed by the Conservatives. There is no question about who has been standing up for veterans and certainly the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore is one of those.

I also want to thank veterans' organizations across the country that provide many services to veterans, whether they are funded directly through Veterans Affairs or through their fundraising, through bingos and other charitable events. In my riding veterans' organizations raise a lot of money for programs supporting veterans and also for other community organizations in my community.

I also want to thank the front-line staff at Veterans Affairs. I know they do the best they can to try to provide the best services for our veterans.

I want repeat something I have said in the House before. I honestly thought the Conservatives would be different than the Liberals when it came to the treatment of our veterans. If the Conservatives support this motion, that will finally prove to me that they have had a change of heart, that they have finally seen that our veterans deserve the full support of all members of the House of Commons.

In opposition, the Conservatives talked a good line. They talked about extending the veterans independence program to all widows. They talked about holding a public inquiry and ensuring there was full compensation for all the victims of agent orange. They talked about opposing the unfair reduction of veterans disability insurance payments, known as SISIP. However, their record in government has been much more modest. In fact, it has been a record of only partial success.

The minister likes to talk about the continual expansion of the budget, which he apparently intends to undo in a single year. His proposed cuts will actually devastate service for veterans. It is a kind of new speak to imagine that we can have cuts up to \$220 million and somehow magically none of the services for veterans will be affected by those cuts. We have numbers being tossed around in various papers, some public and some not, of 300 to 500 staff reductions in Veterans Affairs. How in the world can veterans expect to get the services they are entitled to as a result of their service to our country with those kinds of cuts to the personnel serving them?

The minister and the government have tried to justify these reductions by pointing to a decline in what are now called "traditional veterans", those who served in World War II and those who served in Korea. However, what they are doing, in a way, is devaluing what I would call the modern day veterans, those who have served in peacekeeping operations around the world and those who have served in operations in combat, like in Afghanistan. It would also ignore those whom I had the privilege of welcoming home last weekend on the HMCS *Vancouver*, which returned from seven months in an active combat zone in Libya.

How are these modern day veterans somehow less entitled to veterans benefits than what are called the traditional veterans?

This new budget planning exercise we have been going through with the government reveals the real program of the Conservatives, and this is, as I mentioned, cuts of somewhere, and we do not know the exact figure but we will soon find out, between \$150 million, \$170 million and maybe as high as \$350 million out of a Veterans Affairs budget of \$900 million, cuts from somewhere between 300 and 500 jobs. In a kind of new speak, we are asked to believe that this will somehow result in better services for veterans.

Business of Supply

Just the other day in the House, when it came time to vote on Bill C-215, which was also proposed by the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore and which I had the honour of seconding, the Conservatives voted against it. The bill would end the unfair clawbacks of pension benefits for veterans and members of the RCMP, benefits which they had paid for throughout their careers by paying into CPP. The clawback would result in reductions of up to \$800 a month for some of these veterans and RCMP veterans, \$800 a month which would go a long way for those veterans in maintaining their independence in our communities and not having to rely on provincial or federal government services.

Again, the Conservatives have been clear and they continue to make the point that somehow veterans should get by on their own, that they do not really deserve the kind of support that veterans have traditionally received.

● (1325)

Now that the Conservatives have a majority, they seem to be on course to cut that support. However, allies like the United States and the U.K. have exempted their veterans affairs departments from the across-the-board government cutbacks, recognizing that a general cut in government spending ought not to apply to those who have risked their lives in the service of their country.

In contrast, what would an NDP program for veterans look like? We would start by ending the clawback for retired and disabled Canadian Forces and RCMP service pensions. We would extend the veterans independence program to include RCMP veterans and all widows. In the case of marriage after 60, we would grant pensions and health benefits. We would provide better care for those suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, shorten wait times for disability applications and eliminate or reform the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

There is a large number of things about which I could talk. This is something which may seem small, but it has been a very big problem for many veterans and their families in my riding, and that is the lack of an increase in funeral benefits over the last decade. Even in death, we place a hardship on veterans by refusing to increase those benefits.

The hon. member from Toronto who sits in front of me raised the question of veteran homelessness. I think there is probably no greater shame for a country than for those who have served their country in our forces ending up on our streets without the dignity of a home to call their own.

I find it somewhat surreal to hear that one of the priorities of the minister is to come up with clearer language for the veterans who get a denial of benefits so they will understand exactly why those benefits have been denied. We ought to be working on ways to ensure veterans receive the benefits to which they are entitled rather than to find better ways to tell them why they are not entitled to those benefits.

There is also a disturbing tendency on the other side when it comes to seniors as a whole, and many of our veterans are seniors, to refer to them as a burden on our society. We heard this is the discussions about health care transfers, where it was argued that seniors were taking more than their fair share of health care services.

We heard it in the discussions on the necessity to reduce the OAS, where somehow seniors who worked and contributed all of their lives would have to take less in the future. Once again, this is being applied to veterans in that somehow those who have served their country are not really entitled to fair treatment when they come back from that service.

I began my speech by talking about veterans' organizations, and all the things they did in their communities, and the staff of Veterans Affairs. I would point out that many legions across the country do incredible work in their communities. In my community, one very good example is the charity fundraising that the Royal Canadian Legion of Esquimalt does. We have Esquimalt Neighbourhood House, which provides service to both military and other families in our community. When the Esquimalt Neighbourhood House needed a new roof, the veterans of the Royal Canadian Legion stepped up and made a grant to the house in order to help it put on a new roof so it could continue its services to families.

Like all seniors in our country, veterans continue to contribute in their community, they continue to volunteer and they continue to raise money for charity. I would like to see us recognize the service they have given and continue to give across the country.

I want to conclude by thanking all those who have served their country, whether in the Canadian Forces or the RCMP. It is something I will try to remember to do on all the appropriate occasions and not just once a year on Remembrance Day. I invite all members to join me in those attempts to ensure that it becomes built in to our Canadian culture to recognize the sacrifices made both in times of war and in peace in terms of defending our country.

Today I do so by rising to support the opposition motion. In the budget consultations that went on previously, every veterans' organization called on the minister to back away from cuts to them. I hope when it comes times to vote on this, we will see the unanimous support of all members in the House in recognition of the service veterans have given to their country.

● (1330)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his speech.

This summer, with the minister in fact, I met Alexandre Fontaine, a young veteran who fought in Afghanistan as a reservist and who had difficulty getting the same health services as those provided to the regular forces, because he was a reservist.

First of all, does my colleague think that this is fair? Second, knowing how hard it already is to obtain services, does my colleague think things could get even worse for people like Mr. Fontaine?

Business of Supply

[English]

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, it is very important that reservists get the same kinds of benefits and treatment, especially when they have served overseas with the Canadian Forces, as other members of the forces get. We have to provide full recognition for that.

However, as I said in my speech, we also have a distinction that is being made between traditional and modern day veterans. Some of the veterans from World War II and Korea are entitled to different kinds of benefits than those that are available to modern day veterans. If the government is right on the reduction in the number of traditional veterans, there certainly is enough modern day veterans who could make very good use of those services which they are presently denied.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's comments in regard to the senior pension issue. I would like to pick up on that. Imagine veterans who have served in Afghanistan, who are now approaching age 55, who are listening to this debate and hearing two things consistently coming out.

First, they will be unable to retire and receive old age supplement at 65, as the government is looking at changing it from 65 to 67. That will have a profound impact on them. Second, now they have been hearing about the cutbacks to Veterans Affairs. Again, we are trying to solicit support from the government in terms of making that commitment to our vets. If they are 54, 55 or 56 years old and they look at this budget, it is like a double jeopardy of sorts in terms of their retirement years.

Could the member comment on that and on why all Canadians should be concerned with the way our veterans are being treated by the government?

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, as I said, there is a regrettable pattern starting to occur on the other side of the House, where all seniors, whether veterans or not, are somehow seen as a burden on our society and the idea that families and people should take care of themselves. The question I would ask the government is this. Where would we be if veterans had said, when we called upon them to serve their country, no, that they were going to take care of themselves and their families and that they really did not care what was going to happen to our country. We have to ask that question from both sides when we are talking about veterans and the benefits to which they are entitled.

• (1335)

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to underline the comments of my hon. colleague. He has made a very important point. We asked our veterans to make overwhelming, overarching sacrifices. This is not just any job. This is the job that governments must take a lot of time and deep consideration before engaging our military in any operation. We have had veterans who have come back and they have done the job that our governments asked them to do and yet they are being hung out to dry by a government that really does not stand up for veterans.

My colleague brought up the issue of seniors in the military. Would he continue that thought and talk a bit about how we could better support our veterans?

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, the note I would like to end this on is to also think about the families of veterans. I think about 10 days ago, when I stood on the docks when the HMCS *Vancouver* came back. I think of 200 or 300 family members who were there and who had also made sacrifices while their loved ones were away risking their lives in the service of Canada.

When we talk about cutting benefits to veterans, we are also talking about cutting benefits to their families, most often their spouses, and denying some of the things to which those spouses are entitled in their golden years.

Therefore, I would ask us to think more broadly about veterans and veterans' families when we come to the cutbacks in Veterans Affairs.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as a former member of the armed forces, I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak to this motion. I have wonderful memories of various evenings spent at the Royal Canadian Legion. We always had a very pleasant time. It is an honour for me to speak to this motion.

Since 2007, the government's strategic review has focused on cutting various federal programs and services. These cuts have affected all departments, including Veterans Affairs. The goal of this exercise is to cut 10% from each department. In the case of Veterans Affairs, 90% of the budget is spent on programs and benefits for veterans, and 70% of the staff deliver services directly to veterans. There is not much room for cuts.

In this situation, the math is simple: if the government wants to cut Veterans Affairs Canada's budget, it will have to cut the services and benefits that go directly to veterans. Budget and staffing cuts will inevitably compromise the department's ability to deliver services to the country's veterans.

Our veterans already have trouble accessing some of those services, and many of them have noticed that the quality of services has suffered over the years. In particular, there have been problems with case processing. It is getting harder to reach an agent by phone because there are fewer call centres. If this keeps up, veterans will find it easier to speak to someone at their ISP's customer service centre in India than to a Veterans Affairs Canada agent in our own country.

The agents now have less time in which to make decisions about veterans' needs. In contrast, once the decision has been made, it takes just as long as ever for veterans to receive psychological care and services. The cuts are already being felt. Agents have to work faster, work overtime and make decisions more quickly. This means that they may not be able to take the time required to do their work properly.

Currently, a number of organizations are speaking out against the cuts to Veterans Affairs. Among others, the Royal Canadian Legion and the Veterans Ombudsman have shed light on the problems these cuts will cause and the problems encountered as a result of the staffing cuts. Veterans returning from Afghanistan, just like current soldiers, need and deserve services.

Business of Supply

I am a nurse by training and when I talk to soldiers returning from military operations, I know the consequences that these operations can have on a person. I am talking about physical and mental health problems and post traumatic stress disorder. These are all serious consequences that require immediate care, and aftercare as well.

Roughly 20% to 30% of the soldiers who went to Afghanistan have mental health problems or have post traumatic stress disorder, not to mention physical injuries. These are not problems that can be left unaddressed for two years before something is done. We are talking about serious health situations that require immediate care and assistance.

Since 2001, 40,000 members of our Canadian Forces have been deployed to Afghanistan. Some are still in active service, of course, but some have become veterans. An average of 25%—roughly 10,000 veterans—have health problems. They compromised their health to serve our country. These huge numbers come from the Department of National Defence. They show the critical importance of taking services for veterans seriously.

I am talking about veterans, but we should also talk about their families. Soldiers return home at the end of their mission; unfortunately, some do not. In both cases, the families need assistance. It is very difficult to support someone who is living with post traumatic stress disorder.

• (1340)

Consequently, the families also need help. The children of these soldiers need help supporting their mother or father who has experienced these problems and who may be injured.

When we talk about veterans, we are not just talking about soldiers, veterans and former members of the RCMP, but also about the families of these people. We must never forget that.

Today, we are asking that the Department of Veterans Affairs be exempt from cuts in the 2012-13 budget. This budget is vital to maintaining a certain level of service and the quality of the programs and benefits to which members of the military are entitled. We must take into account that there are already some problems with this program. It is not a program that works seamlessly. There are already problems and budget cuts would only add to them. At this time I believe that our request to exempt Veterans Affairs Canada from budget cuts is reasonable.

Every day in this House, between 2 p.m. and 3 p.m., I hear the Associate Minister of National Defence or the Minister of National Defence repeatedly say that I do not support our troops when I ask for explanations and answers that the opposition and Canadians are entitled to regarding what is happening with the F-35 program. When we talk about the men and women in uniform who return from a mission, people who have given many years of service to this country, who have risked their lives, who have been lucky enough to come home, and who often need psychological, financial and professional support, we are met with budget cuts.

The government can afford jets that are not yet operational, at a cost that is increasing astronomically and with a delivery date that keeps being postponed, but it cannot provide financial support for our veterans who come home after serving their country. This makes

absolutely no sense to me. It makes you wonder who in this House is really supporting our troops.

When that party was the official opposition, it said that it would extend the veterans independence program to widows of World War II and Korean War veterans, but it did not.

In 2005, that party, which is now in office, called for a public inquiry into Agent Orange and full compensation for veterans and civilians who were exposed to it, but it has not followed through.

In 2007, the government committed to take action to address the unfair nature of the service income security insurance plan and long-term disability benefits for members of the Canadian Forces who are medically released, but it did not do so.

In 2005, that party committed to reforming the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and replacing it with a board made up of qualified members with a medical or military background, but it did not do so.

I am wondering what it really means to support our troops. I think that asking this government not to make cuts to Veterans Affairs Canada is a much better way to show our support.

The NDP has asked the government many times not to make cuts to services for veterans, but without success. The NDP has proposed many measures to improve services for veterans, including health care centres of excellence for modern-day veterans, improved access to veterans' hospitals, reforms to the new veterans' charter, an increase in funeral expenses, and concrete action to combat homelessness among veterans.

The NDP's proposals show what it means to support our troops.

In addition, the NDP continues to ask the government to stop clawing back the pensions of retired and disabled Canadian Forces and RCMP personnel; to extend the veterans independence program, which also applies to former members of the RCMP; to eliminate restrictions on pensions and health benefits for spouses in the case of marriage after 60; to provide better care for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder; to reduce waiting lists for disability benefits; to fairly calculate annual leave entitlements for retired members of the Canadian Forces who want to join the public service; and to eliminate or reform the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. We are thus calling for a number of measures. Again, this is what I call supporting our troops.

In order to support our troops, it is essential that the government not cut Veterans Affairs Canada's budget. This is really the only reasonable attitude that this government can take toward our veterans.

Business of Supply

• (1345)

Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have two very simple questions for the hon. member from Abitibi—Témiscamingue. Does she believe that a more efficient bureaucracy can save money while maintaining the benefits our veterans receive? Like her, I have worked in the public service. It is always possible to find more efficient ways to deliver the goods, and that applies in this case too.

She wants to maintain a large bureaucracy at Veterans Affairs, but her party voted against our plan to replace Canadian Forces equipment with new planes, new armoured vehicles and new ships. How does she reconcile these two completely contradictory positions?

Ms. Christine Moore: Mr. Speaker, as I said at the beginning of my speech, 90% of Veterans Affairs Canada's budget goes directly to benefits and services for veterans. I do not think the department has a bloated bureaucracy. The fact is that nearly all of the money is for benefits and services. Still, there are some problems with service delivery. I do not believe that bureaucracy is a problem at Veterans Affairs Canada. The problem is lack of funding, which interferes with access to services. Public servants work overtime, and they have trouble getting their work done.

I do not think that the department's problems have anything to do with bureaucracy. That is why its budget should not be cut. I do not think that bureaucratic inefficiency is a problem there.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minister keeps saying that the services provided to veterans will not be affected, but he has not said that the budget will be kept at its current level. Is it possible to offer an acceptable level of service despite the cuts that are planned in the upcoming budget?

• (1350)

Ms. Christine Moore: Mr. Speaker, I would invite the members to do a simple math exercise. We know that 90% of the Veterans Affairs budget goes directly to benefits and services. The Conservatives plan to cut the budget by 10%. That means they want to get rid of all public servants. To achieve this without cutting any benefits or services, they need to eliminate 10% of the rest of the budget. This means that Veterans Affairs would no longer have any staff; no more offices and no more calls. My colleagues just have to do a quick calculation and they will see that this makes no sense.

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my hon. colleague on her very enlightened and relevant speech. Her deep respect for the Canadian Forces is evident. I wonder if she could talk a bit about the despair that veterans sometimes feel, because they think no one cares about their needs.

Ms. Christine Moore: Mr. Speaker, feelings of despair often come from the lack of logic veterans perceive. Soldiers are used to reacting quickly. They are asked to react immediately in extreme situations, but when they have health problems or are facing crisis situations, they are being asked to wait for weeks on end for health care. I think that is what causes feelings of despair. Their whole lives, these people have been taught to react very quickly in certain situations, but when they have to deal with the system, decisions take forever and there is no concrete action. This makes absolutely no

sense compared to the instructions they are accustomed to when they are the ones providing a service.

[*English*]

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is indeed a pleasure for me to join this debate in the House of Commons on the quality of care for Canada's veterans. Some misinformation has been put out in the House today with regard to cuts or possible cuts to veterans' services and benefits. Many of my colleagues, including the minister, have corrected this misinformation in question period a number of times. Once again, I am pleased to set the record straight.

As the Minister of Veterans Affairs just mentioned in his speech, our government will always ensure that there are the necessary funds to provide Canadian Forces members, veterans and their families with the care and the support that they need. It is true that the number of traditional war service veterans served by the Department of Veterans Affairs is decreasing. While there are younger veterans entering the system at Veterans Affairs, the overall number of veterans served by the department is decreasing.

Their needs must be addressed. If we look at this government's record over the last six years, members will see that the benefits provided have actually expanded. I would like to point out all of the programs to which veterans are entitled are quasi-statutory. Many people will ask what exactly this means. There may be some uncertainty on the other side of the House. What it means is that the Government of Canada must provide these funds to administer those programs.

I will say that one more time for clarity. The Government of Canada must provide the funds to administer those programs. Veterans have the right to various programs and services that they need. The Treasury Board sets aside whatever money is necessary each year to make sure that the department can continue to provide those benefits.

The member presenting the motion is either misinformed or trying to misinform. The fact is the Minister of Veterans Affairs has said it very nicely. He has clearly summarized that the improvements our government has made over the last six years have been in the name of veterans. We know that the needs of veterans are changing and the care of veterans is evolving. It stands to reason that the way veterans access and receive those benefits should change as well.

Our government recognizes this. It has chosen to invest in new programs and initiatives and not just maintain the status quo. Veterans Affairs Canada is creating a more responsive environment for veterans to make sure that they have faster and easier access to the benefits that they deserve with as little stress as possible.

I am splitting my time with the member for Huron—Bruce.

Statements by Members

The department serves close to 215,000 modern-day veterans, war service veterans, members of the Canadian Forces, members and former members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and their families. All of these people in these groups have their own individual needs. It is our job to ensure that these needs are met effectively and efficiently.

How are we achieving this? A lot has changed. The minister announced two weeks ago that he is cutting red tape for veterans' initiatives. Most of these changes enhance front line services and reduce processing times. The minister launched the cutting red tape for veterans' initiatives, which will provide our veterans with the hassle-free service they have asked for without bureaucratic roadblocks. There were resounding responses from veterans saying this is exactly what they have been asking for.

We have also taken action in the following areas. We are communicating with veterans in plain language. Information provided to our veterans, whether it be decision letters or brochures on benefits and services, will be written in a language that is easy to understand.

• (1355)

We have invested in technology which allows the department to make greater use of digital imaging and electronic records.

We have supported the helmets to hardhats program, which helps veterans who are trying to find high paying opportunities to see those opportunities in trades and areas where their skills are needed. We have implemented directed deposits for some VIP payments or reimbursements for treatment benefits.

We have also reduced by one-third the time it takes for a veteran to receive a decision on applications for disability benefits. We have cut in half the time that it takes for a veteran to receive a decision on applications for rehabilitation programs. We have established an Afghanistan and serious injury unit to fast-track the benefits for Canadian Forces members and veterans who have become seriously injured or ill while serving in Afghanistan or elsewhere.

We have added case managers to areas of high demand across this country to deliver one-on-one service for veterans. They have been given more authority to approve vocational rehabilitation plans and work with the veterans to resolve complex challenges. We have reduced the amount of paperwork for veterans when they apply for veterans independence programs which now help 107,000 veterans, survivors and their caregivers remain independent in their homes for as long as possible.

That is an impressive list of accomplishments. Long overdue some would say. Nevertheless, real progress has been made by the department to update the care for Canada's veterans.

I know that the work is far from done. In fact, the Minister of Veterans Affairs has stated very publicly that he intends to lead by example. He wants his department to be one of the most efficient and responsive in all of government. After all, Canada's veterans deserve nothing less.

As the minister stated in his remarks, Canada's veterans have done far more than their fair share to build our great country, to defend our shared values and to make Canada's red maple leaf an enduring

symbol of peace and freedom around the world. This government is doing its fair share in ensuring that they are well looked after.

The motion of the member—

• (1400)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order. Unfortunately, I must interrupt the member as the time for government orders has expired. When the House returns to this matter, the hon. member for Peace River will have two minutes remaining in his speech.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

DON VALLEY WEST

Mr. John Carmichael (Don Valley West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to the world-class health care facilities and neighbourhood service agencies of which I am so very proud in Don Valley West. My riding is blessed with excellence in health care through the staff and researchers at: Sunnybrook Hospital and K Wing, the largest veterans' centre in Canada; Lyndhurst Centre, a place of excellence providing the best in spinal cord research and rehabilitation therapy services; the Canadian National Institute for the Blind; Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, serving children with disabilities; and Bob Rumball Centre for the Deaf, serving the needs of hearing disabled in the GTA.

For community services, I mention with pride Flemingdon and Thorncliffe Neighbourhood organizations, New Circles, Afghan Women's Organization, March of Dimes and Flemingdon Community Legal Services. All of these great organizations are geared to assisting the residents of Don Valley West.

* * *

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Dan Harris (Scarborough Southwest, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by thanking my esteemed colleague from Sackville—Eastern Shore for his unparalleled support of veterans during his time in the House.

Today, the New Democratic Party is calling on the government to shield Veterans Affairs from budget cutbacks. Tomorrow, we are calling for all-party support to ensure that programs and services to all military and RCMP veterans are protected. It would be an affront to ask them to give more.

Statements by Members

My family has had a long and proud record of service to Canada, starting with my great-grandfather, Harold Riley, who served in both world wars. Veterans services kept my grandmother in her home with dignity until she passed away in 2010. I will not accept that the same services would not be there for future veterans. I will proudly vote yes to this motion to honour their memories and service to Canada. I call on the government to do the same.

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CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize that the City of Pickering in the great riding of Pickering—Scarborough East has unanimously passed a motion thanking and honouring the service of the men and women of the Canadian armed forces and the many civilians in supporting roles who served in the combat mission in Afghanistan that ended in July 2011. Many of those who served were from Durham region. I thank City Councillor David Pickles and Deputy Mayor Doug Dickerson who brought this motion to city council.

Canada's armed forces have made a significant contribution to the stability and rebuilding of Afghanistan over the last decade. One hundred and fifty-eight Canadian soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan. Pickering residents and Royal Canadian Legion Branch 606 members crowded bridges and honoured these men and women as they passed through the city of Pickering on the Highway of Heroes.

Lest we forget, lest we forget.

* * *

JIM GREEN

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Alas, Mr. Speaker, last week Vancouver lost an inspiring advocate for my community. On February 28, former councillor and two-time mayoral candidate Jim Green lost his fight with cancer.

Jim was a well-known progressive force in municipal politics and a key architect of solutions to improve the city. He was a passionate doer, with a fountain of ideas which he implemented in one of Canada's poorest neighbourhoods, the Downtown Eastside. Jim founded BladeRunners, an internationally recognized employment program that provides life skills training for at-risk youth. He founded United We Can, a charity that offers residents of East Hastings jobs to clean the streets of their neighbourhood. The Portland Hotel Society, which provides supported living space for the hardest to house people, owes its existence to Jim, among others.

Less than a week before he died, Jim was awarded Vancouver's highest honour, the Freedom of the City award, for his exemplary citizenship, service and leadership. Jim lived according to the idea that one can actually change the world for the better and enjoy it at the same time. On behalf of the citizens of Vancouver Quadra and Vancouver, I offer my deepest condolences to Jim's family and all those he touched.

● (1405)

2012 SCOTTIES TOURNAMENT OF HEARTS

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Red Deer was proud to host the 2012 Scotties Tournament of Hearts. Women's curling teams from all across this great nation vied for the Canadian championship. What a show these teams put on. Excellent shot making, thrilling games and heart-stopping action ensured that curling enthusiasts were treated to the best women's curling on the planet.

Host committee chair Sherri Ryckman and her crew of 528 enthusiastic volunteers did a wonderful job of welcoming curling teams and fans to Red Deer. From the unique opening banquet at the Sheraton Hotel, to the great entertainment at the HeartStop Lounge, right through to the final ceremonies at the Westerner's ENMAX Centrum, curling fans were treated to one of the best Scotties ever.

We will now cheer on Team Canada's Heather Nedohin and her Alberta teammates as they compete for the world championship in Lethbridge.

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[Translation]

PROVINCIAL POWERCHAIR FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on Saturday, February 25, the second annual provincial powerchair football tournament was held in Quebec City at the Centre communautaire des Chutes in the Beauport area. The local team, the Éclairs du Pivot, hosted the following three teams in a tight competition: the Saint-Jérôme Pitbulls—this year's champions—the Montreal Juni-Sport and the Dragonniers from the Madelaine-Bergeron school in Quebec City.

Powerchair football is soccer for people who use power wheelchairs. The event gave the athletes in attendance the opportunity to excel and compete against participants with disabilities from across Quebec and thereby build mutual respect.

Véronique Denis, honorary chair of the tournament, uses a wheelchair and is a member of the Pivot board of directors. She said, "I believe that all the athletes and organizations like Le Pivot are proving to society that people with disabilities have a place and that it is possible to achieve great things together".

Ms. Denis, I wholeheartedly agree.

* * *

[English]

UNIVERSITY OF REGINA

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as an alumnus of the University of Regina, I was very disappointed to hear that my alma mater was experiencing anti-Semitic activities.

Statements by Members

Recently, the University of Regina students union passed a one-sided resolution to join the boycott divest and sanction movement against Israel. The motion was passed at the end of the annual meeting when, as the student newspaper reports, “by the time the motion to boycott Israel came up, a lot of people had left and the remaining crowd members were anxious to join them”.

We have the ironic situation where a student organization, while proclaiming its support for political freedom and democratic discussion, did just the opposite.

Calling Israel an apartheid state is abhorrent and insulting to all Israeli citizens, Jewish, Christian and Muslim.

The University of Regina's administration needs to disavow any support for this offensive motion. I do not believe the University of Regina now supports the suppression of all Israeli academics, that it endorses anti-Semitism or that it sees Israel as an apartheid state. To counter this resolution, President Timmons needs to say so.

* * *

JOSEPH STALIN

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is the 59th anniversary of the death of the left-wing dictator, Joseph Stalin. During a 30-year reign of terror, show trials, purges, war and religious persecution, Stalin oversaw the death of tens of millions.

Even a partial death toll is almost incomprehensible: 15 million shipped to the Gulag, including my own father; millions of ethnic minorities killed during forced relocations; hundreds of thousands of priests, monks and nuns killed and more than 50,000 churches destroyed; an estimated 10 million Ukrainians starved to death during the Holodomor; millions of Poles sent to labour camps during World War II; and 20,000 Polish prisoners of war massacred at Katyn, all part of a decades-long litany of crimes against the Polish people.

This horror, during a time when Pierre Trudeau sympathetically claimed that the Soviet Union was making “tremendous strides”, reminds us that the beginning of statism is the end of freedom and that the moral perversions of Marxist theory can only be put into practice at gunpoint.

We must never forget the evil that Stalin represented.

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[*Translation*]

MEMBERS OF THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to highlight the citizen engagement of 160 people in my riding and more than 14,000 others in Quebec. I sincerely thank all these people for taking action to move this country forward. They refused to be intimidated, they accepted the risks associated with taking a stand and, proud of their ideals, they became official members of the New Democratic Party.

They are showing the way for thousands of others who support us, but who have told me that they are afraid that their organizations will suffer if they publicly support a party other than the one holding the purse strings. This is indicative of the unease caused by the

Conservatives' style of governing, which appears to favour friends of the government.

Nevertheless, the movement is afoot and, day after day, we will continue to show all Canadians that the NDP is the only party that puts the interests of the people before those of big business. Our party truly listens to all Canadians. It will be 2015 before we know it and, together with all Canadians, we will once again have every reason to be proud to be a part of Canada.

* * *

● (1410)

[*English*]

LIBYA

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was appalled to learn today that in Libya the graves of Commonwealth troops, including at least one Canadian who fought in Libya during the second world war, were smashed to pieces in the Benghazi war cemetery.

Just a few short months ago, we saw the brave men and women of the Royal Canadian Air Force successfully participating in a UN-mandated, NATO-led mission to protect civilians from the former Gadhafi regime, and today we see the graves of Canadian airmen destroyed by a group of extremists.

I would like to commend the Libyan National Transitional Council for its promise to pursue those who are responsible for destroying the graves of the brave individuals who fought against those who would oppress their fellow man during the second world war.

Most important, I commemorate the great sacrifice of the Canadians who laid down their lives in the defence of freedom and democracy and pay tribute to those who continue to serve around the world to defend these important values today.

We owe them so much and Libya owes them so much. We must never lose our appreciation of service and sacrifice.

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ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the preservation of language is an essential aspect of cultural heritage. More than 60 first nations languages are spoken from coast to coast to coast in Canada. This unique and fundamental part of Canada's cultural mosaic must be preserved.

What is encouraging is the growing number of young aboriginal activists stepping forward to preserve these languages, working tirelessly across the country to sustain a unique cultural identity. I would like to praise the work of FirstVoices and first nations activists who are leading the way to the revival of first nations cultural heritage. On this side of the House, we salute their efforts.

The full contribution of the first nations, Inuit and Métis people to building Canada has never been fully recognized and honoured. New Democrats are committed to a new partnership to address longstanding neglect and injustice. We are committed to building together a Canada where aboriginal languages, knowledge and culture are respected and reinforced and where first nations communities across the country can stand with hope and pride.

* * *

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week, West Nova was mysteriously added to the list of alleged calls by Gord MacPherson, the campaign manager for Liberal candidate, Robert Thibault, who said that he had no memory of anyone complaining about calls during an election.

The media quoted Mr. Thibeault himself for remembering the incident. He said, “I had one person call saying that he got repeated calls at odd hours from a caller saying he represented the Liberal Party”.

There it is. The Liberals paid millions of dollars making hundreds of thousands of phone calls in these ridings and they now claim to have received these calls from the opposition.

The opposition's exaggerated allegations demean the millions of voters who cast their votes in the last election.

* * *

UNIVERSITY BASKETBALL

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to pay tribute today to St. Francis Xavier University basketball coach Steve Konchalski.

Already the “winningest” coach in Canadian university sport history, he reached a new milestone on January 7 with his 800th victory.

As a player, he led Acadia University to a national title in 1965 and was chosen tournament MVP.

Coach K has led the St. FX X-Men to three national championship victories so far, and he has taken Canada's national team to three Olympic games. He has served as assistant coach of the Canadian team for 16 years, and as head coach for four.

He has been inducted into the Acadia Sports Hall of Fame, the Canadian Basketball Hall of Fame and the Nova Scotia Sport Hall of Fame.

He is known as a class act, a man of intelligence and humility, but perhaps the greatest tribute to Steve Konchalski comes from his players who say that he always demanded a lot from them, both in the classroom and on the court.

I invite all members to join me in recognizing Coach Steve Konchalski on his 800 victories.

Statements by Members

JAMES Q. WILSON

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, James Q. Wilson, who died last Friday, was one of the quiet giants of our age whose rigorous common sense was an antidote to the intellectual poison of so much of the 20th century academic philosophy.

Wilson will be best remembered for his “broken windows” theory of policing, which held that the failure to police supposedly minor breaches of the social order, such as vandalism, defacement art and graffiti, as well as drug use, undermines a community's sense of security and mutual trust, leading to more broken windows in crime. This insight ran counter to the soft on crime ideology of the sociologists and criminologists of the day. However, whenever policy-makers enacted Wilson's ideas, such as in New York, crime went down and the intellectual bankruptcy of his opponents was exposed.

However, Wilson's legacy is much broader. At a time when moral philosophers were denying the very possibility of truth, Wilson tested their claims against the reality of lived experience and showed them to be hollow.

As an enlightenment empiricist, he reintroduced the moral sense of Aristotle and Adam Smith to a new generation of policy-makers and reminded us that an ounce of—

● (1415)

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for London—Fanshawe.

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VETERANS AFFAIRS

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last week, I had the privilege of travelling to St. John's and Halifax with the veterans affairs committee to study the delivery of front line health and well-being services to our Canadian vets. We heard from Jim Lowther and David MacLeod about the unacceptable and preventable tragedy of homeless veterans.

The very least that presenters should have from elected officials is a respectful and attentive ear. After all, is the goal not to ensure that the heroes who served our country so faithfully receive the care and help they need?

I was appalled by the disrespect and inattention of committee members on the government side. Sleeping was not the only affront. Others laughed inappropriately or wandered in and out of the room with more attention to a Blackberry than to the people who had taken their time to come out and speak.

A late and grudging apology just does not cut it. Our veterans and all Canadians deserve better. After witnessing what I did last week, I wonder what action the Conservatives will take to honour all of our veterans—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Prince George—Peace River.

*Oral Questions***LIBERAL PARTY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last weekend's Vancouver *Province* described a photo of the interim Liberal leader and Liberal loyalist, Jaspal Atwal.

I will share with the House the rap sheet on Mr. Atwal. Mr. Atwal was convicted of the attempted murder of Malkiat Singh Sidhu in 1986. He even admitted to pulling the trigger. He was also charged with the beating of former Liberal MP Ujjal Dosanjh in 1985. Someone should tell Terry Milewski at CBC.

I wonder what Mr. Dosanjh thinks about the interim Liberal leader being photographed with Mr. Atwal.

Mr. Atwal's Liberal connections run even deeper. In the 2011 election campaign, he helped bankroll the Liberal Party's campaign in Fleetwood—Port Kells. Is the interim Liberal leader going to defend his friend, Jaspal Atwal? Is the interim Liberal leader now so focused on the relentless pursuit of power that he will associate with anyone for an easy vote, even a convicted criminal like Jaspal Atwal?

ORAL QUESTIONS

[*Translation*]

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to give this government the opportunity to set the record straight with regard to the fraudulent phone calls. Last week, the Prime Minister stated that only the Liberal Party made such calls from the United States. Now, we have learned that the Conservative Party also made calls from the United States and that it used American companies.

Will the Prime Minister and the government apologize for misleading Canadians?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a number of things are clear: the opposition cannot accept the results of the last election. The Liberals paid millions of dollars to make calls to hundreds of thousands of voters, and they hired American companies to make many of those calls. Now, the members of the opposition are trying to make exaggerated and unfounded claims to explain why Canadians did not vote for them in the last election.

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this government must stop blaming others, take responsibility for once and shed some light on this scandal.

The Prime Minister said that the calls in question were calls that the Conservative Party of Canada made to its supporters, calls to inform people of changes in polling stations. However, there were no changes in polling stations in most of the ridings.

Can the Prime Minister and his government explain this today?

● (1420)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has not provided any evidence to support her allegations. They are exaggerated and unfounded claims that demean the millions of voters who exercised their right to vote during the election. Voters, Canadians, gave us a very strong mandate. That is democracy. That is reality. The opposition should learn to accept it.

[*English*]

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the reality is that the Conservatives said they never used U.S. companies, but that is not true and we know it now. Calls were made telling voters about polling station changes in ridings where there were none. Thirty-one thousand individuals contacted Elections Canada. That is the reality.

Now Conservative MPs are blaming Elections Canada for this mess. Does the government realize Canadians are losing confidence in this process? Do you care?

The Speaker: I would just remind the hon. member to address her comments to the Chair, not directly at her colleagues.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can confirm to the Leader of the Opposition that the speaker cares deeply.

I would also say to the Leader of the Opposition that what the Prime Minister said last week was absolutely 100% accurate. The Conservative Party and our callers were all out of Canada; all the calls came from Canada. What the member is alleging is absolutely false. The stories were in fact false. No voter ID calls were made from the U.S. on behalf of the Conservative Party.

What we can also say is that the Liberal Party paid millions of dollars to contact hundreds of thousands of voters right across the country. It appears it may have given them some wrong information.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am holding a picture from the website of RackNine owner Matt Meier holding a Government of Canada cheque that says “for some services rendered”. The only problem is there is no public record of this payment to RackNine.

I ask the government, what exactly were the services rendered by RackNine to the Conservative government and which government departments? Were these tendered contracts or sole-sourced contracts? Will the government table in the House all records of all invoices and contracts between the Government of Canada, any department, and RackNine?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course, the member may have some issues with RackNine and they may be personal issues.

Oral Questions

What we can say very clearly is the opposition is having a very difficult time accepting the results of the last election. What we know, and these are the facts, is the Liberal Party paid millions of dollars to contact hundreds of thousands, I would argue probably millions, of voters right across the country. It appears it may have given them some incorrect information.

These exaggerated allegations demean the voters of this country.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, another photo from Matt's website shows an impressive stack of servers that he calls his political superweapon.

We know the Conservative Party paid for the services of this political superweapon during the last general election, because we have the invoices for that, but why would the Conservative government be buying the services of a political superweapon?

Why would Canadian tax dollars be going to hire a high tech political superweapon, and who did the government intend to use that political superweapon against?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative Party does in fact have a political superweapon. He is from the riding of Whitby—Oshawa. He is the Minister of Finance of this country.

He has led this country through one of the most challenging economic circumstances that we have ever witnessed, and he has done so in a fashion that Canadians from coast to coast to coast have endorsed. That is why so many voters voted in support of the Conservative Party.

What is clear and factual in this case is that the Liberals spent millions of dollars to contact hundreds of thousands of Canadians, and it appears they may have given them some incorrect information.

* * *

• (1425)

PHONE CALLS TO MOUNT ROYAL CONSTITUENCY

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one thing we do know for certain is that after the election there was a poll taken in the riding of the member for Mount Royal by Campaign Research Inc., in which it was said that the member for Mount Royal was in fact stepping down.

The Speaker of the House in ruling on that question said that the taking of that poll, which was apparently authorized by the Conservative Party, was reprehensible. Does the government agree that in fact that tactic is reprehensible?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): What is reprehensible, Mr. Speaker, is that the opposition, specifically the Liberal Party, is having a very hard time accepting the results of the last election.

It is very clear and it is a fact that the Liberal Party and its riding associations spent millions of dollars to contact hundreds of thousands of households across this country. It appears that they were probably given some incorrect information.

The exaggerated allegations of the member opposite demean the millions of voters who cast their ballots in elections right across this country.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is very clear that after the election, in the riding of the hon. member for Mount Royal, calls were made that were authorized directly by the Conservative Party. The Speaker of the House described those tactics as reprehensible.

I will ask the question again: is the government prepared to accept the Speaker's ruling and recognize that in fact those tactics are reprehensible?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the real question is whether the Liberal Party is prepared to accept the results that Canadians handed them in the election. Canadians voted in very large numbers—there was an increase in voter turnout—to reject the Liberal Party as never before. The Liberal Party is now trying to come up with explanations for its extraordinary defeat.

It has to accept the results. It has to accept democracy. That is what we are doing.

[*English*]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives cannot even answer an interesting, clear, factual question.

A poll was commissioned by the Conservative Party. The Conservative candidate said, "It was not me; it was the party". The government House leader said, "It is okay; it is just free speech", and the Speaker of the House said, "It is reprehensible".

I am asking the Government of Canada a very simple and direct question: Does it agree with the Speaker of the House that such a tactic, spreading false information, carrying out a poll based on a false assumption, is reprehensible? Does the government agree with that, yes or no?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is reprehensible to make baseless, unsubstantiated smears in this House. That is what the leader of the Liberal Party has undertaken for more than the past week.

The leader of the Liberal Party knows full well every household that they called, every originating phone number they called them from, and in fact when those calls were made. When will he make those phone records public, because I believe when those phone records are made public, the Liberal Party will have fingered itself for each and every one of the calls that they allege took place.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last week, I asked the Conservatives to explain the new in and out scheme carried out by RMG to fund calls of an indeterminate nature. The answer I got was a bizarre rambling commentary about the Liberals and North Dakota that had nothing to do with anything. What we know is that the defeated candidate in Chicoutimi—Le Fjord said, “I can’t really say if I got my money’s worth or not.”

We want to know what that money was used for, where the calls were made, and whether the RCMP are going to have to raid the Conservative Party offices again to find out the truth.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member should not be giving us noise instead of facts, but that is what he does every time he rises in the House. The fact is that the Liberal Party spent millions of dollars on hundreds of thousands of calls. Now the Liberal Party needs to explain what those calls were about.

Making unfounded allegations will not change the outcome of the election.

• (1430)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not remember asking a question about the Liberal Party.

This reminds me of the in and out scandal. They denied their involvement until they had no choice but to admit their guilt and pay the maximum fine, so they should be careful with their answers.

It did not take long for another failed candidate to confirm that he had nothing to do with the RMG contract. The Conservative candidate for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques' campaign was nothing but a mailbox for RMG bills.

Why did these Quebec ridings pay RMG for services they did not receive, and whose purposes did their money serve?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, these unfounded and exaggerated allegations are an attempt to downplay Canadians' historic participation in the last election. Canadians gave us a strong mandate to manage the economy, create jobs and protect national security.

Canadians made a democratic decision, and the opposition cannot erase that by making false, baseless accusations.

[English]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, deny, blame, change the channel; every day the Conservatives come up with a new story to divert attention away from Conservative election fraud. The problem is their story is starting to stumble on itself.

Early last week, it was the kid from Guelph. Then the Prime Minister told us it was Liberal call centres in the United States and the Conservatives had never hired any call centres, which was false. Now we find that the Conservative Party thinks it is Elections Canada that was behind robo fraud.

What is it this week? Do they now agree with the member for Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, that Elections Canada is trying to make the government look bad? Who is it?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again it is very clear the opposition has a hard time accepting the results of the last election. It is also clear and an absolute fact that the Liberal Party paid millions of dollars to contact hundreds of thousands of households right across this country. Apparently the Liberals gave people incorrect information and they may have even called them at inappropriate times of day. However, the Liberal leader is sitting on all these facts and will not release the Liberals' phone records. I think he should have to. Something that is also clear is that these allegations demean the voters of this country.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will tell members what demeans the voters of this country. Whether it is Vladimir Putin or Pierre Poutine, citizens have a right to vote without being interfered with where they are out having a monkey wrench. They deserve better than to have a minister stand up day after day and mislead the Canadian people.

Last week, the Minister of National Defence said it was a kid from Guelph, case closed. Now the Conservatives are saying they do not know what is going on in Guelph. Now we are hearing that the Conservative Party is trying to blame Elections Canada because obviously blaming the little Liberal Party is not following through either.

When will the government stop playing the blame game and come clean with the electoral fraud that happened under its watch and its party.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am not trying to blame the little Liberal Party, nor am I attacking the outrageous allegations of the NDP. I am merely pointing out that they have been making these baseless smears for more than a week. There is no substance to their argument.

In our campaign, as our campaign manager said yesterday and has been repeated by others who have come forward, we were absolutely punctilious in following all the rules of Elections Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in June 2011, the Conservative Party fundraising call centre, which is located in the exact same office as RMG in Toronto, repeatedly solicited Fernand Coulombe, an 89-year old man from Montmagny, for a \$200 donation. Mr. Coulombe said he never promised anything. Yet I have before me the letter he received, which reads, “Thank you for your generous promise of a \$200 donation.”

Oral Questions

Is RMG mandated to do its own fundraising on behalf of the Conservative Party? Is aggressive solicitation a common Conservative practice?

Our seniors deserve respect. So, please, how about a little transparency for once?

• (1435)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, speaking of transparency, Canadians took part in an entirely transparent election and gave us a very strong mandate to lead another government and to create jobs for our economy. Now the opposition is trying to explain its historic defeat by making false, unfounded allegations. This trivializes the participation of millions of Canadians in the electoral process. We must celebrate democracy, not attack it.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first we had calls falsely attributed to Elections Canada and now we have harassing phone calls soliciting donations. Things are going from bad to worse.

The Conservatives say they have nothing to hide, yet they refuse to give Elections Canada the power to demand documents from political parties in order to ensure compliance with the Canada Elections Act.

Are the Conservatives afraid that their party's documents might contain embarrassing information?

Instead of going after Elections Canada, the Conservatives should give it the powers it needs to carry out a thorough investigation. What are they waiting for?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Elections Canada is the appropriate organization to carry out this investigation, and we respect that responsibility.

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SERVICE CANADA

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in late August 2011, the Minister of Industry said: "I made representations to the minister. We have a nice centre that is well situated and we received positive recommendations from the Department." This justifies an inquiry by the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner.

Although the minister doth protest, will he finally admit that he personally intervened in this file, that he wants Rimouski families to move to Thetford Mines, and that his father's associate has interests in the building where the centre is located?

I want answers, as does the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. Will he give us the answers?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is outrageous, it is not at all true. The minister was not involved in the decision made five years ago regarding Thetford Mines. The decision was made by Public Works and Government Services Canada.

When we have to improve or consolidate other offices, the same process will be used to make the decision about their locations.

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[English]

GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the OECD, Moody's, Fitch and the IMF are all warning that reckless cuts could throw Canada back into recession. The fragility of the economy has been acknowledged by private sector economists today. The Conservatives ignore this and move full speed ahead with their costly prisons agenda and with the F-35s, whose price tag continues to grow with every new problem.

Budgets are about choices. The Ontario government is cancelling the next round of corporate tax cuts. If even the Ontario Liberals are listening to the public and to the NDP, why will the Conservatives not listen and put families before prisons, fighter jets and corporate tax cuts?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is the party that is putting families ahead of everything else when it comes to Canadians.

To be clear, we are on track for modest growth in Canada. We are in relatively better shape than others. We are focused on implementing the next phase of Canada's economic action plan and are looking forward to March 29 when we will introduce the economic action plan for 2012.

What we have said repeatedly is that we have made the necessary decisions to stimulate the economy and we will do so if necessary. The AAA rating agencies, and Fitch in this case said recently:

Achieving fiscal consolidation and balanced budget targets are important to maintain credibility.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if we look at the 2011 growth rate, the reality is that Canada, under this government, ranks 131st in the world. That does not give this government much credibility.

To us, in the NDP, seniors are more important than inadequate planes. To us, essential services are more important than prisons.

The Conservatives are making bad choices.

Why not make Canada's seniors and families the priority in the next budget? Why not use common sense?

Oral Questions

●(1440)

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have already said, it is this party and this government that are making families a priority. It is this government that put another \$3,000 in families' pockets through tax cuts. Last week—maybe my colleague has not heard—Statistics Canada announced that the Canadian economy grew by 1.8% in the fourth quarter of 2011. That is progress. We are going to continue in the same vein and increase economic growth in Canada.

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[English]

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we know that the Conservative campaign in Guelph had a non-disclosed commercial relationship with RackNine, the company Pierre Poutine used to defraud Canadian voters on election day. We know that fingers were initially pointed at a 23-year-old Conservative partisan involved in the Guelph campaign, and since having been thrown under the bus by the Minister of National Defence, he has come out and urged the guilty party to come forward.

If the Conservatives admit that an electoral fraud took place, and even the Minister of National Defence thinks it had to do with the Conservative Party, why will they not hand over the evidence?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what is alleged to have happened in Guelph is unacceptable. We want to get to the bottom of this. The Conservative Party of Canada and, I understand, the member for Guelph are in fact assisting Elections Canada in this regard.

However, the member can do even more to assist. He can go to his leader and ask his leader to provide the call records from the Liberal Party in the last election, because the Liberals have made a lot of unsubstantiated allegations. We believe very firmly that when they make those records available, it will become very clear that the Liberal Party has in fact contacted hundreds of thousands of households. The Liberals made a lot of calls in the last election and they are the source of all these complaints.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, employees of the Conservative call centre in Thunder Bay have publicly confirmed that they were told to misdirect voters to the wrong polling stations. Some of them even reported this to the RCMP.

What is the government doing to ensure that the Conservative Party hands over all scripts, which these call centre employees were forced to use, to Elections Canada and the RCMP for investigation?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we know that Elections Canada made some 127 polling location changes, late changes, in the last election, affecting more than 1,000 polls. We contacted Conservative supporters to make sure they were aware of the changes and we contacted Conservative supporters to make sure they got out and voted on election day.

It is also clear that the Liberal Party spent millions of dollars to contact hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of homes right across this country. It appears it has given them some incorrect information. However, the Liberal leader is sitting on all of this information while he makes unsubstantiated smears.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we all agree that the robocall scandal undermines the very foundations of democracy.

The body that regulates automated telephone calls is the CRTC, and it has the necessary authority to conduct a quick and effective investigation.

We know that the government wants to co-operate with Elections Canada in its investigation.

Will the government ask the CRTC to intervene?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Elections Canada is the appropriate agency to conduct this investigation.

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NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, an emergency meeting about the F-35 jets was held in Washington, but we keep hearing the same old story from the Conservatives.

Almost all of Washington's partners have a plan B. The NDP has been asking about a plan B for months, but the Conservatives have ignored us.

I would like to know if the minister has finally listened to our allies' concerns about the problems with the F-35s.

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I absolutely listen to our allies, who know far more than the member opposite about what is going on. I met with our allies and received an update on the program's progress and challenges. As no contract has been signed, the perspective gained from the discussions with our allies and industry partners was extremely valuable.

As Canada's CF-18s are nearing the end of their usable lives and must be replaced, I am proud of our actions to provide our Canadian Forces with the best equipment they need while protecting Canada's sovereignty.

●(1445)

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that response reminds me of the tale of the emperor with no clothes.

*Oral Questions***NATURAL RESOURCES**

We have the briefing note for the minister that reveals the government's concerns about price, production and, ironically, transparency, dating back to at least September of last year. Yet Conservatives continue to mislead Canadians saying over and over again that the F-35 is on track. Again, last week we heard the same line coming out of the minister's emergency dinner and schmooze with Lockheed Martin in Washington.

When will the government give Canadians the truth about the F-35?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the only emergency here is the NDP's desire not to help and support our military men and women.

The member has his facts wrong. This is a complex file. The member has shown a complete lack of understanding of the complexities and facts. He is misleading Canadians.

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PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the F-35 fiasco, the Conservatives will not come clean and they are just not getting the job done on behalf of Canadians.

However, on another topic, under the government, CSIS has faced a slew of problems and controversies. Now we are hearing concerns about CSIS turning up unannounced in Canadians' workplaces. What guidelines are in place to ensure that surprise workplace visits by CSIS officers are not used to harass and intimidate Canadians?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me assure the House that our security officials conduct investigations in accordance with Canadian law, but if the member has constituents with specific complaints about any action by CSIS agents, I would encourage them to file a specific complaint with the independent review agency. There is an independent review agency that oversees the actions of the security officials and that is where they can go.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the security of Canadians is obviously a priority for everyone. However, surprise workplace visits from CSIS officers can have very serious repercussions for the people involved, even if the intent is only to gather information.

According to an access to information request, this policy has not been reviewed in over six years. Honest Canadians are rightly concerned about the unfair repercussions of such visits.

Will the government review and update this policy to properly respond to Canadians' concerns?

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if I can repeat it, let me assure the House that our security officials conduct investigations in accordance with Canadian laws. If the member has any specific complaints that laws are being broken or that otherwise unethical behaviour is being engaged in, he is free to contact the independent review agency that reviews all complaints.

Mr. Jay Aspin (Nipissing—Timiskaming, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government's top priority remains jobs and economic growth. Booming Asia-Pacific economies have shown great interest in our natural resources. In fact, there is \$500 billion in potential investments in our resources sector that will create hundreds of thousands of jobs. Our regulatory system can be duplicative, inefficient and excessively lengthy.

Could the parliamentary secretary update the House about what our government is doing to reform the system in order to grasp Canada's full potential?

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we know that reviews of major projects can be done in a quicker, more streamlined way while still enforcing strong environmental and safety standards. An inefficient regulatory system does not lead to better environmental outcomes. Projects that are safe and generate thousands of new jobs across the country and open up new export markets must not die due to unnecessary delays in the approval process. Our government will take the actions necessary to responsibly develop Canada's natural resources.

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[*Translation*]

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, our veterans are asking for just one thing: access to faster services that better meet their needs.

Today, the NDP has moved a motion proposing that the government honour veterans by not making any cuts to the department's budget. The motion is simple and will not cost the government a penny. We are asking the government to maintain the Department of Veterans Affairs' budget as it now stands.

Can the minister give us one good reason for not supporting our motion?

● (1450)

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is a very good reason for wanting to maintain benefits for veterans while also wanting to get rid of the rampant bureaucracy that is suffocating veterans and their families.

That is why I am inviting the opposition to support our amendment, which is designed to maintain our veterans' benefits. I am inviting them to take concrete action, to rise in the House to support our veterans and eliminate bureaucracy.

Oral Questions

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, before 87-year-old Art Humphreys, a World War II veteran from Musquodoboit Harbour, died, he asked for a lift to get in and out of his basin and it was denied. Sarah Atwood, a 90-year-old World War II veteran, was denied access to Camp Hill Hospital. Ted Shiner, a 90 year old from Bedford was denied VIP services. Now, Louis Dionne, a 97-year-old veteran from North Vancouver, was told that in order to get an answer on VIP, it would take a minimum of 16 weeks before the department would get back to him.

Why is the government trying to balance its books on the heroes of our country?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member will understand I cannot comment on specifics. I can say that as of today 107,688 veterans are benefiting from the veterans independence program. Why? Because it is a good program that is aimed at helping veterans.

Our government expanded the VIP to provide benefits to certain eligible, low-income and disabled survivors. Why are the New Democrats voting against the extension of the VIP?

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, hold the presses, there is a Conservative awake during a question about veterans.

On the minister's desk is a file for David Kurts. He served in the merchant marines in the 1940s and served two tours in Korea. In June 2010 he was denied geriatric services. On January 11, he was denied VIP. In January of this year, he was denied a reassessment. Again at the end of the month, he was denied veterans' benefits one more time.

He is 86 years old. Why are you denying David Kurts the rightful benefits he earned after serving his country so valiantly? Why are you—

The Speaker: Once again, I will remind the hon. member to address his comments through the Chair.

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member can get very excited, but the facts remain that our officials are working to provide best services to our veterans. That is what they are doing on a daily basis, all over the country. We are providing them with the tools and the money they need.

I invite the NDP member to support our budget initiatives so we can continue to support our veterans. Let us get rid of bureaucracy, wasteful bureaucracy, and support our veterans for real by voting for our budget.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if he wants to get rid of the politically appointed hack of places for Conservative failed members of the political party, get rid of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and put that \$11 million back into programs and services.

Tomorrow in the House, at 5:45 p.m., the people over there, the Conservatives, have an opportunity to once and for all tell all the major veterans' organizations that they are in support of the NDP motion to not cut the Department of Veterans Affairs and to ensure that all veterans and RCMP members and their families get their benefits in a timely and comprehensive manner.

Will the minister and the Conservatives be supporting our motion tomorrow at 5:45 p.m.?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is clear the opposition wants to maintain the red tape. That is what it wants to do. We want to maintain benefits to veterans. If the member is serious about getting unanimous consent, he would support our amendment to ensure that benefits are maintained.

Our veterans all over the country are telling me to cut the red tape. Is the member ready to cut the red tape and get rid of wasteful bureaucracy? That is the question.

* * *

PENSIONS

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, with the Cons in crisis over fraudulent election calls, they may have thought that the public had forgotten about their plans to raid OAS pensions. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Today's seniors and baby boomers built our country and they want to know why the government has an endless pot of money for new jets and jails but only scraps for our seniors. Canadians may have been tricked by fraudulent phone calls last May, but they will not be tricked into believing that an OAS cut is good for them.

● (1455)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has made a commitment to protect seniors and protect their pensions. That is exactly what we are doing. We are protecting it for those seniors who are currently collecting OAS, those who are near retirement and for future generations.

If the hon. member is so concerned about seniors, then why did she and her party vote against pension income splitting, vote against raising the age tax credit for seniors and so many other things that we have done to help seniors keep more money in their pockets?

*Oral Questions***NATIONAL DEFENCE**

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, now that the minister has returned from his F-35 problems conference in Washington, could he tell the House whether he talked to his American and U.K. counterparts about their scaling back or outright cancellations of the program? Will he purge the government's contempt by filing the F-35 cost report as demanded by finance committee in the last Parliament?

When will the minister file a plan B? Will he tell the House when we will be getting the planes, how much they are going to cost and how many we will be getting?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was pleased to host our international partners in the joint strike fighter program at our Canadian embassy in Washington on Friday. I can assure the member opposite that we are all working through these issues. Good progress continues to be made.

We will always be vigilant with our taxpayer hard-earned dollars. We will continue to monitor the program closely.

* * *

[Translation]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a senior Environment Canada official has suddenly become the head of a new pro-oil sands industry group, and the Conservatives would have us believe that this is perfectly fine. Again.

The Conservatives are creating a revolving door between government and industry.

Can the Minister of the Environment explain the meaning of the term, "conflict of interest"?

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Dr. Dan Wicklum, the previous director general of Environment Canada's Water Sciences and Technology Directorate, is on temporary assignment, unpaid leave, as the chief executive of Canada's Oil Sands Innovation Alliance. We anticipate his assignment will bring new opportunities to strengthen the relationship between the Government of Canada and oil sands industry.

While on assignment, he is subject to the rules of ethics and conflict of—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Halifax.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have trouble with the concept of conflict of interest, so let me help them with an example.

When a senior Environment Canada regulator suddenly becomes the head of a pro-industry oil sands group, there is a pretty obvious conflict there. While the government may want us to believe there is nothing to see here, Canadians are not buying it.

The minister thinks there is no conflict of interest here, so I would ask him to define conflict of interest.

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I said, Dr. Wicklum is on leave without pay. He is subject to the values and the ethics code for the public service and this code is clear on the measures to be taken by public servants to avoid real or perceived conflicts of interest.

Dr. Wicklum's assignment agreement stipulates that he cannot provide information to COSIA or its members that relies on information that is not publicly available.

* * *

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are faced with a number of important and increasingly complex financial decisions for themselves and their families. Unlike the NDP, our government understands the needs of Canadian consumers. Since 2006, we have introduced strong new pro-consumer rules for credit card companies, established a code of conduct for the credit and debit card industry to help small business and created an independent task force on financial literacy.

Could the parliamentary secretary inform the House of even more initiatives our government has introduced to help protect Canadian consumers?

● (1500)

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is helping to protect Canadians with pro-consumer measures. We are ensuring Canadians get clear and direct information on financial products so they can make the best decision to help their families. That is why we introduced new measures to empower consumers, including banning unsolicited credit card cheques and implementing a new code of conduct on mortgage prepayment information. We also finalized measures to shorten the cheque holding period to four days and to give immediate access to the first \$100 of any cheque Canadians cash.

These are important measures to help Canadians make the right financial decisions and have timely access to their own money.

* * *

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the chief government whip is no doubt aware of the reports last week where the member for Calgary West fell asleep in a parliamentary committee during a presentation on veterans homelessness. The member subsequently denied this and launched, and this may sound familiar, an unsubstantiated smear campaign against the veterans group that went public with it.

Oral Questions

These veterans are angry and offended. They are ready to sue him and are seeking his removal from the committee. Will the chief government whip respect the wishes of the veterans and remove the member?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member has done the right thing and apologized. This government has the utmost respect for our veterans and especially for those who dedicate their lives to each other.

How we can show real respect in the House to veterans is by supporting our budget initiatives. Every member of our government has supported, for the last six years, our increases in the investments in our veterans, and we will continue to do so.

* * *

[Translation]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a number of climate research projects are in jeopardy, and major projects have been scrapped because the Conservatives did not keep their promise to invest \$35 million in this scientific field. The Conservatives broke their promises, and the PEARL Arctic research lab will have to be shut down.

Why is the minister consigning decades of investment to the scrap heap and, in the process, sacrificing our reputation as a science leader? Will the government save PEARL?

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, budget 2011 did provide \$35 million over five years to the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, known by its acronym NSERC, to support climate change and atmospheric research at Canadian post-secondary institutions. This arm's-length body will determine where these scientific research projects will go over those five years in dispensing the \$35 million.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the situation in Syria has hit a new low as the Assad regime continues to unleash violence against its own citizens and blocks the delivery of humanitarian aid from getting to those who need it the most.

Recently the Minister of Foreign Affairs indicated that Canada would be considering new measures to bring pressure on the Assad regime. Would the minister please update the House on the latest steps taken by our government?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his interest in this regard.

I think all Canadians are appalled at the deteriorating situation in Syria. Today, for the sixth time, we increased the severity of our sanctions against the Syrian regime, to be some of the toughest in the world. Effective immediately, we have announced that all of our Canadian diplomats have left Damascus. The safety and security of Canadian personnel is our top priority and that is not a decision we took lightly.

We will continue to work with others, including the Arab League, to bring every diplomatic pressure to bear to ensure that the people of Syria are protected.

* * *

TRANSPORTATION SAFETY

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, at a time when the government needs to take action on rail services, the Conservatives are cutting \$200 million from VIA Rail, millions of dollars that could make travel safer, like installing the locomotive cab voice recorder, or the positive train control system, an advanced automatic brake system that would prevent deadly accidents. Instead of wasting billions on failed fighter jets, why will the government not invest in rail safety?

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, our thoughts and prayers remain with the families of the victims of the tragic accident that happened some days ago.

Rail security is very important to our government, which is why we have taken strong action and delivered results.

Once Bill S-4 is adopted, we will have implemented 83% of the recommendations from the Rail Safety Act review panel, and our actions helped to decrease the numbers of rail accidents in 2007.

* * *

● (1505)

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, we are all very concerned about the escalating tensions around Iran's nuclear intentions and the growing evidence that it may be developing nuclear capabilities. Canada must work as hard as possible to avoid conflict.

In this light, are we not concerned that our new trading partner, Sinopec in China, which is the largest buyer of Iranian oil, is undermining the sanctions?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are tremendously concerned about three things going on in Iran. Obviously the enrichment and the IEA report of its nuclear activities cause all of us substantial concern.

We are concerned about the deteriorating human rights record of the Iranian regime, and that is why Canada has led efforts at the United Nations to bring light to this huge problem. We are also concerned by the intervention that Iran takes in neighbouring countries supporting international terrorism.

We will work to take every diplomatic effort necessary, in concert with our allies and others, to ensure that Iran does not obtain nuclear weapons.

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of the Hon. Dag Terje Anderson, President of the Parliament of the Kingdom of Norway.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

CANADA-JORDAN ECONOMIC GROWTH AND PROSPERITY ACT

The House resumed from March 1 consideration of the motion that Bill C-23, An Act to implement the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Agreement on the Environment between Canada and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Agreement on Labour Cooperation between Canada and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, be read the second time and referred to a committee, and of the motion that this question be now put.

The Speaker: It being 3:05 p.m., the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the previous question at the second reading stage of Bill C-23.

Call in the members.

And the bells having rung:

• (1515)

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

(Division No. 140)

YEAS

Members

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Ablonczy | Adams |
| Adler | Albas |
| Albrecht | Alexander |
| Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac) | Allison |
| Ambler | Anders |
| Anderson | Armstrong |
| Ashfield | Aspin |
| Baird | Bernier |
| Bezan | Blaney |
| Block | Boughen |
| Braid | Breitkreuz |
| Brown (Leeds—Grenville) | Brown (Newmarket—Aurora) |
| Brown (Barrie) | Bruinooge |
| Butt | Calandra |
| Cannan | Carmichael |
| Carrie | Chisu |
| Chong | Clarke |
| Daniel | Davidson |
| Dechert | Del Mastro |
| Devolin | Dreeschen |
| Dykstra | Fantino |
| Findlay (Delta—Richmond East) | Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk) |
| Flaherty | Galipeau |
| Gallant | Gill |
| Glover | Goguen |
| Goodyear | Gosal |
| Gourde | Grewal |
| Harris (Cariboo—Prince George) | Hawn |
| Hayes | Hiebert |
| Hillyer | Hoback |
| Holder | James |

| | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Jean | Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission) |
| Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's) | Kennedy (Calgary Southeast) |
| Kent | Kerr |
| Komarnicki | Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings) |
| Lauzon | Lebel |
| Leitch | Lemieux |
| Leung | Lizon |
| Lobb | Lukiwski |
| Lunney | MacKenzie |
| Mayes | McColeman |
| McLeod | Menegakis |
| Menzies | Merrifield |
| Miller | Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam) |
| Moore (Fundy Royal) | Nicholson |
| Norlock | O'Connor |
| Obhrai | Opitz |
| Paradis | Payne |
| Plamondon | Poillievre |
| Preston | Raït |
| Rajotte | Reid |
| Rempel | Richards |
| Rickford | Ritz |
| Saxton | Schellenberger |
| Seeback | Shea |
| Shiple | Shory |
| Smith | Sopuck |
| Stanton | Strahl |
| Tilson | Toet |
| Toews | Trost |
| Trottier | Truppe |
| Tweed | Uppal |
| Van Kesteren | Van Loan |
| Vellacott | Wallace |
| Warawa | Warkentin |
| Watson | Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to |
| Sky Country) | |
| Weston (Saint John) | |
| Wong | Wilks |
| Yelich | Woodworth |
| Young (Vancouver South) | Young (Oakville) |
| | Zimmer — 140 |

Government Orders

NAYS

Members

| |
|--------------------------------|
| Andrews |
| Atamanenko |
| Ayala |
| Bennett |
| Bevington |
| Blanchette-Lamothe |
| Borg |
| Boufín-Sweet |
| Brosseau |
| Caron |
| Cash |
| Chicoine |
| Choquette |
| Christopherson |
| Coderre |
| Côté |
| Cuzner |
| Dewar |
| Dionne Labelle |
| Doré Lefebvre |
| Duncan (Etobicoke North) |
| Easter |
| Foote |
| Garneau |
| Giguère |
| Gravelle |
| Harris (Scarborough Southwest) |
| Hassainia |
| Hughes |
| Jacob |
| Kellway |
| Lapointe |
| Latendresse |
| LeBlanc (Beauséjour) |
| Leslie |
| MacAulay |
| Marston |
| Masse |
| May |

Government Orders

McCallum
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Nantel
Nunez-Melo
Papillon
Péclet
Quach
Rafferty
Raynault
Rousseau
Savoie
Sella
Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor)
Sitsabaesan
St-Denis
Stoffer
Thibeault
Turnel

McGuinty
Michaud
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Murray
Nicholls
Pacetti
Patry
Pilon
Rae
Ravignat
Regan
Sandhu
Scarpaleggia
Sgro
Stewart
Sullivan
Tremblay
Valerioté — 118

Cannan
Caron
Casey
Charlton
Chisholm
Chong
Chow
Clarke
Coderre
Côté
Cuzner
Davidson
Dechert
Devolin
Dion
Donnelly
Dreeschen
Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Dykstra
Eyking
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
Flaherty
Freeman
Gallant
Garrison
Gill
Goguen
Goodyear
Gourde
Grewal
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hawn
Hiebert
Hoback
Hsu
Hyer
James
Julian
Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Kerr
Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lamoureux
Larose
Lauzon
Lebel
LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Lemieux
Leung
Lizon
Lukiwski
MacAulay
Mai
Martin
Mathysen
Mayes
McColeman
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
Menegakis
Merrifield
Miller
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Moore (Fundy Royal)
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Murray
Nicholls
Norlock
O'Connor
Opitz
Papillon
Patry
Péclet
Plamondon
Preston
Rae
Raitt
Rathgeber
Raynault
Reid
Richards
Ritz
Sandhu

Carmichael
Carrie
Cash
Chicoine
Chisu
Choquette
Christopherson
Cleary
Comartin
Crowder
Daniel
Day
Del Mastro
Dewar
Dionne Labelle
Doré Lefebvre
Dubé
Dusseault
Easter
Fantino
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Foote
Galipeau
Gameau
Giguère
Glover
Goodale
Gosal
Gravelle
Groguhé
Harris (St. John's East)
Hassainia
Hayes
Hillyer
Holder
Hughes
Jacob
Jean
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Kellway
Kent
Komarnicki
Lake
Lapointe
Latendresse
Laverdière
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)
Leitch
Leslie
Liu
Lobb
Lunney
MacKenzie
Marston
Masse
May
McCallum
McGuinty
McLeod
Menzies
Michaud
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Nantel
Nicholson
Nunez-Melo
Obhrai
Pacetti
Paradis
Payne
Pilon
Poilievre
Quach
Rafferty
Rajotte
Ravignat
Regan
Rempel
Rickford
Rousseau
Savoie

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

The next question is on the main motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Speaker: All those in favour will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Speaker: All those opposed will please say nay.

An hon. member: Nay.

The Speaker: In my opinion the yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

• (1525)

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

(Division No. 141)

YEAS

Members

Ablonczy
Adler
Albrecht
Allen (Welland)
Allison
Anders
Andrews
Armstrong
Aspin
Aubin
Baird
Bennett
Bernier
Bezan
Blanchette-Lamothe
Block
Borg
Boulerice
Brahmi
Breitkreuz
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Brown (Barrie)
Butt
Calandra

Adams
Albas
Alexander
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Ambler
Anderson
Angus
Ashfield
Atamanenko
Ayala
Bélangier
Benskin
Bevington
Blanchette
Blaney
Boivin
Boughen
Boutin-Sweet
Braid
Brosseau
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Bruinooge
Byrne
Calkins

| | |
|---|---|
| Saxton | Scarpaleggia |
| Schellenberger | Seeback |
| Sellah | Sgro |
| Shea | Shipley |
| Shory | Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind- sor) |
| Sitsabaiesan | Smith |
| Sopuck | Sorenson |
| St-Denis | Stanton |
| Stewart | Stoffer |
| Storseth | Strahl |
| Sullivan | Thibeault |
| Tilson | Toet |
| Toews | Tremblay |
| Trost | Trottier |
| Truppe | Turmel |
| Tweed | Uppal |
| Valeriotte | Van Kesteren |
| Van Loan | Vellacott |
| Wallace | Warawa |
| Warkentin | Watson |
| Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country) | |
| Weston (Saint John) | |
| Wilks | Wong |
| Woodworth | Yelich |
| Young (Oakville) | Young (Vancouver South) |
| Zimmer— 263 | |

NAYS

Nil

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried. Accordingly, the bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on International Trade.

(Bill read the second time and referred to a committee)

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

GLOBAL CENTRE FOR PLURALISM

Mr. Rick Dykstra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32(2) I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the summary of the Global Centre for Pluralism's corporate plan for 2012.

* * *

[Translation]

INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 34(1), I have the honour to present to the House, in both official languages, the report of the Canadian Branch of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie, respecting its participation in the parliamentary seminar, "Taking legislative action to end violence against women and girls" of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the National Assembly of Burkina Faso, held in Ouagadougou, from March 30 to April 1, 2011; the meeting of the Political Committee of the APF, held in Liège, Belgium, from May 1 to 5, 2011; the meeting of the Cooperation and Development Committee, and the meeting of the Parliamentary Network for the fight against HIV/AIDS of the APF, held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from May 23 to 27, 2011; and finally, the seminar on the roles of women in political, civil and family life, and on the APF's implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of

Routine Proceedings

All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, held in Budapest, Hungary, from October 26 to 27, 2011.

* * *

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, discussions have taken place among all parties and I believe you will find consent for the following motion. I move:

That, at the conclusion of today's debate on the opposition motion in the name of the member for Sackville-Eastern Shore, all questions necessary to dispose of this motion be deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred to Tuesday, March 6, 2012, at the expiry of the time provided for Government Orders.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to propose this motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

PETITIONS

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition signed by people from all over Canada who are concerned with the proposed megaquarry at Melancthon township in Dufferin county. It would be the largest open pit quarry in Canada at over 2,300 acres.

The petitioners are concerned with a number of things. This megaquarry would initially have 150 truckloads per hour of aggregates leaving the quarry heading south and 150 empty truckloads returning to the quarry. Other trucks would be transporting 52 tonnes of explosives to the quarry per day on local roadways not designed to carry such traffic.

The petitioners ask that the Government of Canada conduct an environmental assessment under the authority of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act on the proposed Highland Companies megaquarry development.

● (1530)

INTERNATIONAL AID

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have two petitions today.

The first petition is from a number of constituents of mine who are calling on the government at this time of the forthcoming budget to protect foreign aid spending by the government. The petitioners bring to the attention of the government that departments are being asked for saving plans of 5% to 10% in preparation for the budget. However, CIDA has \$5 billion a year, only 2% of the budget, which has been frozen for two years. This has resulted in an effective cut of nearly 5% in real terms when measured against inflation.

Routine Proceedings

CIDA's work results in substantial improvements in the lives of many of the world's poorest people and goes towards training teachers, regional education, improving health care and providing access to clean water. Many non-governmental organizations in the development sector depend on CIDA as a source of funds in order to run their own programs.

These are young people who recognize that youth are suffering from the recession in Canada, but they still support a strong foreign aid budget. The petitioners call upon the government to exempt the Canadian International Development Agency from budget cuts in the 2012-13 federal budget.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from a number residents in my riding and surrounding ridings who are calling on the government to reverse its decision to close the Newfoundland and Labrador marine rescue coordinating centre in St. John's and reinstate its staff and services. They oppose the decision to close it. They want the government to acknowledge that the closure would mean service would suffer and lives would be at risk.

The petitioners emphasize that the St. John's rescue coordination centre staff have a unique knowledge of the area of ocean and coastline. They also have a unique knowledge of the people who are engaged in activity on the ocean, particularly the fisher persons and crews, dialect and language, and locations. Their unique knowledge is extremely important to the efficacy and safety provided by that marine services coordination centre.

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present this petition regarding CCSVI. Former deputy surgeon general and director general of the Laboratory Centre for Disease Control, Dr. Michael Shannon, writes:

Having lived through the restructuring of the Canadian Blood System in the late 90's and helped to enhance both the regulatory and public health components of Health Canada, I consider the lack of definitive action on the part of Governments, Government agencies such as the CIHR and NGOs...extremely disappointing.

The petitioners call for the Minister of Health to consult experts actively engaged in the diagnosis and treatment of CCSVI to undertake phase 3 clinical trials at multiple centres across Canada and to require follow-up care.

NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present a petition from citizens concerned about nuclear disarmament. I note that the majority of the signatories are from the fair city of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island.

The petitioners take note that there are some 22,000 nuclear weapons in the world. They note that the UN Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, has proposed a summit on nuclear disarmament. The petitioners call upon Parliament to issue an invitation to all states to gather in Canada to begin discussions needed for a global legal ban on nuclear weapons.

PENSIONS

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to present a petition containing hundreds of names of constituents

from my riding on the east coast of Newfoundland and the Avalon Peninsula.

The petitioners call upon the Prime Minister and the government to maintain the age for receiving OAS benefits. Many seniors look forward to this benefit as they reach age 65. Pushing it to age 67 would only affect the lowest income seniors and deprive them of \$30,000 in benefits over that two-year period. Also, low-income Canadians are more heavily reliant on OAS and the GIS.

The petitioners are calling on the Prime Minister and the Government of Canada not to touch old age security.

ABORTION

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to present a petition from a number of constituents in beautiful Langley, British Columbia.

The petition indicates that Canada is the only western nation to have the same policies as China and North Korea having no laws restricting abortion and that Canada's Supreme Court has said that it is Parliament's responsibility to enact abortion legislation. The petitioners are calling upon the House of Commons to speedily enact legislation that restricts abortion to the greatest extent possible.

● (1535)

OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present four petitions.

The first petition deals with an issue that is very timely and is for the Minister of Finance's attention. It calls for Canada to end subsidies to the oil and gas industry. This is a commitment the Prime Minister made in 2009 at the G20 summit in Cincinnati and yet he has not delivered on it.

The petitioners are from Kelowna, B.C. and request that the Government of Canada cease and desist international lobbying efforts in favour of the fossil fuel industry.

HOUSING

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition deals with the issue of affordable housing. The government used to provide a tax benefit that encouraged the building of purpose-built apartment units. Since that tax credit ended, there has been a decline in the building of rental units. In order to advance affordable housing, the petitioners endorse the position of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to bring it back.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the third petition deals with issues of human rights, particularly the attitude of the Chinese government toward the human rights of practitioners of Falun Dafa and Falun Gong. It calls on the Government of Canada to put all reasonable measures forward to persuade the government of China to respect human rights and stop persecuting practitioners of Falun Dafa and Falun Gong.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, in this petition, petitioners from Ontario and British Columbia, including some from my riding, from Salt Spring Island and Pender Island, call on the government to stop promoting the Enbridge project, the 1,200 kilometre pipeline to Kitimat, and the highly risky, irresponsible concept of supertankers plying those waters. The petitioners ask the government to step back and await the evidence before promoting any private sector project to send our bitumen crude to China.

PENSIONS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, like the member from Newfoundland, I hear from seniors across the country. This petition is with regard to the OAS. The Government of Canada has made a decision that is going to have a very profound negative impact on seniors across this land. The petitioners want to express their concerns and are calling on the government to do the right thing, respect the needs of retiring seniors, whether it is today or tomorrow, and support the OAS and other senior pension programs, at the very least maintain them, or enhance them.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I wish to inform the House that because of the deferred recorded divisions, government orders will be extended by 19 minutes.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—VETERANS AFFAIRS

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Peace River has two minutes remaining in his presentation.

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to complete my speech by saying that the motion before us today from the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore ignores a critical point. Our government has been very clear that we will maintain

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benefits for veterans. However, this does not mean we cannot find internal efficiencies and ways to cut red tape and improve services for veterans. With that in mind, I move that the motion be amended by replacing all of the words after the word “committing to” in section (a) with “maintaining veterans’ benefits and”.

● (1540)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It is my duty to inform hon. 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 Sackville—Eastern Shore if he consents to the amendment being moved.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): There is no consent. Therefore, pursuant to Standing Order 85, the amendment cannot be moved at this time.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Beauport—Limoilou.

[Translation]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, after listening to the hon. member’s speech, I must admit it never ceases to surprise me. In any case, the Conservatives constantly display some hysteria—we might even say they illustrate and add colour—in launching witch hunts they justify as an attempt to cut red tape. I have seen the same thing when it comes to small businesses and another hon. member from this government. At the end of the day, they are sweating the small stuff and completely ignoring the bigger picture at the expense of our veterans.

After his speech, will the hon. member please stop distracting us from the main issue, which is truly to take care of our veterans with tangible actions? In other words, will he listen to the NDP’s proposals instead of focusing on problems that do not really exist?

[English]

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Mr. Speaker, this is the first time veterans have ever heard that red tape at Veterans Affairs has not been a problem. I am blown away at the suggestion the member just made. He suggested that no veteran has ever experienced red tape being a problem within the department. Having spoken to veterans in my constituency as well as veterans across this country, I can say that one of their largest frustrations is dealing with the red tape in terms of waiting for documents to be sent in and then hearing back and the vocabulary that is used in rendering the decisions.

This is the crux of the problem. We are dealing with it. Anyone watching this debate will clearly identify that it is the personal opinion of the member opposite and not the opinion of the entire NDP, but if it is, that will demonstrate how out of touch the NDP and the member are on this issue.

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Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to honour our veterans, their families, the fallen and those still serving. There is no commemoration, praise or tribute that can truly match the enormity of their service and sacrifice. We owe them a debt of gratitude we can never repay.

Instead of trying to repay our obligation, we let them down on so many issues. For example, too many injured veterans go without the care they need. Too many veterans do not receive the support they have earned. Too many veterans have nowhere safe to sleep at night. It is truly shameful that a 92-year-old veteran in Edmonton ever had to say to me, "There is a long road to go to make this right and you must not give up because we never did".

Does the hon. member think that our veterans deserve better and that they need more services, more supports, and not less?

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is absolutely right that our veterans deserve the best care that we can provide. We owe them a debt of gratitude for the sacrifices that they and their families have made for Canada.

Clearly, there have been problems. Starting with our government's action to reform the veterans charter and the actions that have been undertaken for the last six years, a litany of changes have been brought into place, all intended to make it easier for veterans to get the care that they need. There has been an expansion of the care that is available to veterans and their families.

We are committed to standing with our veterans and to standing with families of veterans to ensure that they have the care. We have done that for the last six years. The mess we found when we first took over the department and many departments was unfortunate. We are going to continue to find efficiencies. We are going to continue to provide the service, continue to provide the care to our veterans and their families. I would ask all members of the House to support this government's initiatives in doing just that.

• (1545)

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to speak on this important topic relating to our veterans and the services we provide to them through Veterans Affairs.

I would like to thank our veterans past, present, and future for the proud work they have done and will do day in and day out for all Canadians. Despite conditions or locations, they answer the call every day. When people join the Canadian Forces they sign a contract to serve our country with unlimited liability and that could include their life or physical impairment. For that, we can never do enough for them.

As parliamentarians, Canadians and Canadian taxpayers, we owe it to them when they come through on the other side to support them with programs and to deliver those services on a timely basis that truly reflects the service and commitment they have made for us. In that context, I think every parliamentarian believes that, and I really believe that virtually all Canadians at home believe the commitment the forces make and that we make in return.

To put some context to the service we provide to veterans, we need to go back to 2006 and look at how and why the new veterans charter came into place. It is a new level of commitment that all parliamentarians of the day made to veterans. Certainly the previous

level of services under the Veterans Act was one level, but the new veterans charter raised the bar and created a new atmosphere and level of service. It was not mandated by bureaucrats; it came from the grassroots.

The new veterans charter came about because veterans were asking for different services. The model that was brought in is a living document, one which is not set in stone forever and always. It can evolve with the changing needs of our veterans.

Ironically, from 2006 to late 2010 and early 2011, we saw the evolution and the changing needs of our veterans in just those few short years. Because the veterans charter is a living document we began to investigate. We heard from different groups what they would like to see and what the shortcomings were with the veterans charter, and changes were made. It was passed unanimously in the House and brought into effect in the fall of 2011.

I have had the pleasure to serve on the committee since 2008, which is when I was elected. There were two or three highlights. One had to do with the earnings loss benefit, providing a minimum income for those veterans who were injured who qualified. It brought them to a minimum level of \$40,000, despite where they were on the pay grade. In addition, there was the permanent impairment allowance. That is key. That was brought to \$58,000 for those who are the most severely injured. It is vitally important to recognize that there are commitments we need to make both at the department and taxpayer levels to support those who have been severely injured. In addition, all members who were on the committee in the last Parliament would attest to this highlight, the lump sum benefit. Veterans were asking for flexibility around that, that maybe instead of taking a lump sum payment, to look at receiving instalments, similar to an annuity, over a number of years as they saw fit.

These were some of the changes we saw as the new veterans charter evolved. They were good changes. There were many more, but for the purpose of this speech, those are some that we can focus on.

There is another important thing we can look at which was also a vital contribution by the past veterans ombudsman, Colonel Pat Stogran. I have great respect for what the gentleman had to say and the fact that he was able to speak his mind, specifically on behalf of veterans. I applaud him for his courage. One of things he spoke about was the service delivery by the department.

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•(1550)

Most Canadians assume that all government departments and bureaucracies operate at the highest level of technology, with the current day technologies that most corporations and businesses have come to know. In fact, one of the most important things in Veterans Affairs, the veterans' health records, is not electronic. This is something the department is embarking on. It is part of its transformation agenda. It is vitally important to be able to deliver faster and more efficient services to our veterans. In addition to that, all of the other IT software systems will work to provide all staff members inside the department a much better way of communicating with one another, because it does not just come out of one department in one city or town. Rather, it is from coast to coast to coast. The better and the greater the use of technology, the better services we can provide to our veterans. This is similar to what President Obama in the United States embarked on in 2009 with the transformation 21 initiative, wherein the American government was working on making its health records electronic.

I had a discussion with a friend in the military about his medical records and how things worked where he was stationed in Petawawa. I found it amazing that in the year 2012 this is how documents are handled. Therefore, I am happy to see the department move forward.

In addition to everything I have discussed, let us look at some things the department provides funding for and is committed to at the very grassroots level.

I had the great opportunity late this past year to go to the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital in Edmonton. Truly all Canadians would be proud of the level of technology, service and care provided there. It was really astounding and impressive that in Canada we have such a high degree of services we can provide veterans, young and old. We were able to see what it was doing right from one end of the hospital to the very other. In addition to that, some of the corporate partners in Alberta have really helped to bring forward some of the latest technologies to Glenrose Rehabilitation centre. Therefore, when we look at services, we need to really take a look at those.

One interesting comment that veterans' advocate Michel Drapeau said back at the end of August was that it is not a cost issue but an internal issue, when we are looking at the services delivered to veterans. The point is that no matter how much money the department has in its budget, it can never do enough. There would never be enough to really put into perspective the level of commitment and sacrifice that all of our veterans have provided. We have to work internally to find out why and how we can deliver services in a more timely and more efficient manner. It is true that every year nearly 90% of the budget of \$3.4 billion or \$3.5 billion is delivered directly in services and benefits. It is the 10% that we really need to work on so that we can deliver that 90% in the most efficient manner possible.

There were a couple of interesting groups that we have heard in committee this past year. One in particular was CanVet Vocational Rehabilitation Services. There was another group that came in as well. These people help place veterans in the workforce. They do a great job working on their resumés and working with the individuals to really meet the needs of the employers. Veterans Affairs works with these groups in placing thousands of veterans every year. As

well, helmets to hardhats will be a great portal and avenue for veterans to find jobs and provide links with the corporate community for them find them meaningful and gainful employment. We know they have so much to add. They have had great experiences in working with teams in tough conditions. They have a lot to offer, both the old generation that is working today and the new generation.

I know my time is running short. I could talk all day about all of the great services and benefits that Veterans Affairs provides, but we always need to work harder to find new ways to serve our veterans. We should never say this is where we are happy, because the sky is the limit for what we can provide to our veterans.

•(1555)

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague who is on the Standing Committee of Veterans Affairs, where he is a well-respected member. I have an awful lot of time for this fine man, sir. I think he is a decent parliamentarian and a good advocate on behalf of veterans. He has also heard testimony from many people within Veterans Affairs about people who are very frustrated.

I have heard the government talk about cutting red tape. The member knows all too well that one of the largest problems we have within the Department of Veterans Affairs is something called the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. He knows it very well. He knows that the vast majority of its members are political appointees, that they have never served a day in uniform, either in the RCMP or the military, and that not one of them is considered a doctor. Yet they get to adjudicate cases on medical evidence and then, eventually, deny these in many cases.

If the government wishes to cut red tape, would he agree that we should get rid of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, take that \$11 million and reinvest it back into programs and services for veterans, RCMP members and their families?

Mr. Ben Lobb: Mr. Speaker, that is a fair question. I think we could all make our own commentaries on the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Let us be honest: there is room for improvement there. I do not think anyone in this House today should say it is perfect. That is just a fact of life. There do need to be improvements at the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. I would look forward to any suggestions the member has to make improvements, to provide efficiencies. I do not think getting rid of it is the first step we should take. We should try to make some improvements and push those forward because, at the end of the day, the board is supposed to be there to provide a second set of eyes for the evidence being provided in the first case.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank the member for Huron—Bruce for his comments. I serve on the veterans committee with him and share his interests in service delivery and improving it. The member is genuinely concerned about that, regardless of partisan or non-partisan overtones, and I commend him for that.

Business of Supply

One of the things he said toward the end of his speech was that we cannot do enough for veterans, that we cannot say this is the established level and that we are not going beyond it. In fact, is that not precisely what the proposed amendment wants to do? The proposed amendment refers to our “maintaining” veterans' benefits, so the status quo is good. However, the main motion that we are debating would allow for the moneys no longer being spent on dying veterans to be reinvested. Therefore, the very thing he advocated at the end of his speech is in fact the substance of the motion.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Mr. Speaker, I think what the member is trying to do is actually to twist around what I said, because what we are really talking about here is service. We are maintaining the benefits that veterans receive, and that is the most important thing. However, on the service side, with the delivery of those benefits, the sky should be the limit. We and the people in the department should strive every single day to think of better ways to deliver those services to the veterans.

Down the road, as veterans' needs evolve and we look at the new veterans charter and there need to be changes or enhancements, let us go for it. I do not think there is anyone in this House who would vote against improvements to the veterans charter. It has been a year since we looked at it and in the next year or two, it will be time to take another look at it. As time moves on, let us take a look at it to see where we can make improvements. Let us find out about the needs of our vets returning from Afghanistan.

There are a lot of opportunities and I think is one. This is why Veterans Affairs works, because it is not partisan. We are all in this together. I would like to see things move along.

• (1600)

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to share my time with the hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour. I hope that is acceptable.

I will begin my remarks by saying how sad it is that this debate is even necessary. Here I want to thank the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore, not the minister, not the government, not the Prime Minister, but this member who has been the leading voice standing up and fighting for veterans, RCMP and their families, day after day. We thank this member for bringing this forward and giving us this chance.

As I said, what a shame and sad commentary on the government that we still have uniformed citizens in the theatre of war, whether a declared war or not, who are dying. That is the only reality that Canadians care about, and the government can put any label it wants on it.

There is not a Canadian, short of a mom who does not have milk and food for her baby, who is prepared to say that the health care, respect and dignity of those fellow citizens who don that uniform and go into harm's way on our behalf should not be given every single support necessary to give them that life and dignity, assuming, indeed, they return back home alive.

How sad it is that in this context we have to bring forward a motion, on bended knee, “Please do not cut the benefits to our veterans”. How shameful it is that we would have to do that. It is not being done in the United Kingdom. It is not being done in the United

States. It is not being done in Australia. However, here in Canada, we have to have a debate about whether or not our veterans' services and benefits will be protected from the austerity budget that is coming at us.

We have listened to the Conservatives on any given day for years when they were in opposition or in government, and no one short of my friend from Sackville—Eastern Shore can stand up and mouth the words of respect and dignity and service and loyalty and all the great attributes that are well deserved to be heaped upon our veterans.

The Conservatives are really good at the words, and they are even better at doing the saluting when the ships are going off from our shores. There are lots of flags, lots of bands, lots of support, lots of words about how wonderful these Canadians are.

However, what really matters for those of us who are here, who are not in government and cannot do anything other than say thanks, is to be sure that the one thing we can do as Canadians is to give our voice and our support to a policy that says the government will not cut veterans' programs, it will not cut veterans' benefits, and it will not harm their families.

The Conservatives make the speeches, but let us never forget they have the power and the money and could make this whole argument redundant. If we listen to their speeches, we should be in this place right now questioning whether or not they are pandering to veterans by giving them so much. To listen to the Conservatives' speeches, the veterans are the most important people in the whole nation.

When the bands are gone and the ministers and senior military officials are gone and the veterans are coming home, if they are lucky enough to come home, and they have needs, where will the band be for them then? Where will all the parades be for those who are suffering with mental health issues, whose physical lives have changed forever, who cannot breathe right, who cannot walk right, or who do not have a sexual life, all of those things that are real and they live with when they are alone? It must seem so much more lonely when the person does not even think the government is on his or her side. That is the shame of why we are here today.

• (1605)

The Conservatives are great at making speeches. They are great at taking credit when they are prepared to buy big military assets and beef up the military budget. Why are they not standing up for veterans, the women and men, the reservists in uniform, who do the biggest thing that a country can ask of a citizen, and that is put on a uniform, take a gun and fight? They are not expected to ask why or what it is about. They cannot question whether or not to be there. They are expected to just go there and do the job, and that is what our armed forces do with pride.

Business of Supply

In return for that blind support, all they are asking for is to be cared for when they come home, that their families be given a chance to get back on a normal path, that their families be taken care of if they do not come home. While the rest of us benefit from what they have done, they ask for decent dignity. This is about that.

The government says that it just needs to change a few red tape rules, that bureaucracy is the problem, that red tape is the problem. The government does not think the budget is to blame. If that were the case, these galleries would be filled with veterans who agreed with the government's idea of cutting red tape. They would be telling the government to ensure that the austerity program would be front and centre at Veterans Affairs, that they knew if the government got rid of the red tape, they would then get the benefits. They are not here saying that and they are not going to be here.

We just need to ask legions how they feel about this idea. There is a voice that actually represents our veterans. They are both angry and terrified at the prospect of what little benefits our veterans will get beyond the chopping block.

We have tried on a number of occasions, again thanks to the leadership of the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore, to help our veterans. We brought in an NDP veterans first motion in 2006, and as I recall, the government of the day, the Conservative government, was quite pleased to stand and support it. Conservative members probably gave all the right kind of speeches, but they did not do it.

Words are cheap. Programs and benefits cost money and bureaucrats have to be hired to administer the programs. We can call bureaucrats evil or fantastic, depending on whether they have the programs to administer to help the veteran at the end of the phone, or at the end of the computer hookup or standing right in front of them.

This is not about red tape. This is not about bureaucracy. This is about a political will that either the Conservatives have or do not have. This is about standing up to their highfalutin words about what they say about our veterans. This is about whether they are prepared to put real money behind that.

We demanded before, and we will continue to demand, but at this point, nobody has demanded any great expansion of programs. Our veterans were willing to give up their lives and in many cases they did. All they and their families and their representatives are asking is for the government not take a meat cleaver to the veterans affairs ministry. They are asking for the same respect that the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia have shown to their veterans.

I end with passionate remarks. I am saddened and border on disgusted that we would even need to have a debate like this. It will be interesting to see how government members vote. If they do support the motion, it will be interesting to see whether it finds its way into policy. Who knows? The Conservatives talk one game and do another.

I am proud to stand here in support of the motion. I am proud to let the veterans of Canada know that they are not alone, that the vast majority of us in the House do support them and are prepared to say so on any day we are called to.

● (1610)

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the minister and I have said repeatedly in the chamber, benefits to our veterans will be maintained. There is no debate or discussion. Nobody has ever once suggested that benefits to our veterans will be reduced. In fact, it is our Conservative government that has brought in the most sweeping improvements to veterans' benefits in some 60 years through the new veterans charter.

The opposition parties voted against funding for the new veterans charter. Perhaps the hon. member opposite could explain why he chose to vote not to fund improvements to the new veterans charter to assist our veterans.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, those are nice words and people get the impression everything will be fine. If that is the case, then why at his last news conference did the former veterans ombudsman, whose job it is to speak for veterans, say this:

It is beyond my comprehension how the system could knowingly deny so many of our veterans the services and benefits that the people and the government of Canada recognized a long, long time ago as being their obligation to provide.

We agree with that. Why does the government not?

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we heard in question period that the apparent enemy of veterans was red tape and that we really needed to not pass the NDP motion so we could get at the red tape, which leaves me a little confused. I would ask the hon. member if the elimination of red tape within the Department of Veterans Affairs is inconsistent with the spirit of the motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, is cutting red tape inconsistent with the cuts? I think I understand where the member is coming from. Every ministry should be constantly reviewing for efficiencies and redundant red tape as a matter of course. I have been through the Mike Harris years and I know a red herring when I see one. This is all about pretending that red tape and bureaucracy are the problem. We can all understand that. It is pretending there is some bottleneck and if we could just remove that, all the great benefits would flow forward.

This is not just from me. The former veterans ombudsman has said that currently the benefits are not getting through and that there are not enough benefits and services. Therefore, we are going to ignore this red herring and focus on the real issue, which to, at the very least, maintain the veterans ministry that now exists to serve the people who we hold in the highest regard: our fellow citizens in the armed forces.

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, 90% of the departmental budget is allocated to delivery and legislated benefits and services. Now the government is going to cut anywhere between \$170 million and \$300 million out of the \$900 million budget. By cutting that much money out of the budget, how can the government not cut services?

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Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, the answer is it cannot. There is no way one can remove that much money from a budget that already has such a large percentage. I am not on the committee, though I am sure it is close to 90%.

Regardless, any amount of money cut out of supposed red tape at the end of the day is going to leave some veteran or family member without a service or benefit to which he or she is entitled. That is not acceptable and this motion is to say that the government is not going to make it worse, under the guise of austerity, by going in with a meat cleaver and start hacking away. Every dollar out of that ministry means some veteran is not getting a service he or she is bloody well entitled to and the rest of Canada wants the person to get.

• (1615)

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 Saanich—Gulf Islands, The Environment; the hon. member for Trinity—Spadina, Airline Safety; the hon. member for Scarborough—Guildwood, National Defence.

Resuming date, the hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am please to speak to an issue as important as this. I am somewhat intimidated to have to follow the member for Hamilton Centre, who speaks on issues as important as this with a level of passion to which we all should pay some attention.

I am pleased to speak in support of the motion that was introduced by the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore, which reads:

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should: (a) honour the service of Canadian military and RCMP veterans and their families by committing to not cut Veterans Affairs Canada in the upcoming budget; and (b) provide programs and services to all military and RCMP veterans and their families in a timely and comprehensive manner.

I have been paying attention to the debate today and listening to members on the government side talk about how everything is fine. They are saying that there is going to be cuts, not to programs and services, but to red tape or to the bureaucracy and that this will not affect the services and programs. I find that hard to believe on a couple of levels.

First, 90% of the funding in Veterans Affairs Canada goes to programs and services. Therefore, if the government is going to cut that department by 5% to 10%, then I would like to see how it would do that without affecting programs and services.

Second, government members are arguing this point in a way to suggest that everything in the department right now is fine. We have heard my fellow colleague from Nova Scotia talk in the House repeatedly about the problems that our veterans are facing in trying to deal with this department. Again and again, cases come forward that are denied for no reason or there are non-sufficient reasons given. Senior veterans who are now in a frail condition need support and services, whether that be health care or otherwise, but they are either unable to get them or they are put through such a wringer of a process that it just adds to their burden.

It has been said by others much more eloquently than I that these are the women and men who have fought and served on behalf of our country and in defence of our country, democracy and the UN. They have made unbelievable contributions to Canada and to generations for many years. However, the government seems to be turning its back on them.

It is not just this government. This has been going on since 1998. The auditor general said first in 1998 that claims were being denied repeatedly without sufficient justification and that veterans were not getting the services and supports they deserved. Here we are in 2012, and it is continuing apace.

In February, Guy Parent, the Veterans Ombudsman, said in a new report that veterans were not being given adequate reason for why their requests for disability benefits were being turned down and that they were not getting timely and comprehensive services and programs.

We heard from the former ombudsman and auditors general. However, the problem continues to exist in our country.

• (1620)

I appreciate the members opposite getting up and talking with their hand over their heart about how much they support and believe in veterans and people who serve in the military and the RCMP, but that is not good enough. We need to do more than that. We need to work harder. We need to be committed to putting the money and resources in place for these men and women who the government has been quite prepared to send and put in harm's way in different parts of the world. These people have gone willingly and, in many cases, made the great sacrifice, and we are not prepared to support them and their families when they return. For that kind of commitment. I do not understand it. I cannot fathom it. It is wrong and we are trying to do everything we can to turn it around.

We have heard the government say that there are fewer veterans, that they are dying off. In fact, there are more veterans. The veterans are continuing. The government may remember that it dedicated women and men to fight in Afghanistan. Recently, the chief of army staff, Lieutenant-General Peter Devlin, stated before a Senate committee on national defence that over 40,000 Canadian Forces members have deployed to Afghanistan since 2011. They have examined the situation and they have suggested that 30% of those people studied receive some form of mental health care, 8% of those were diagnosed with PTSD and a further 5% with some type of Afghan-related operational stress injury. What about those people? Do they not deserve support and services from the government? We need to do something. We need to take a stand in this House to ensure the government does the right thing. Its allies in the United States and in the U.K. have said that their veterans will not be subject to austerity.

I would suggest that if the government is so convinced that its red tape review will have the kind of effect that will recognize a savings, then it would be prepared to exempt this department and find the money elsewhere through those kinds of red tape.

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I will talk about the kinds of services and the fact that services are not available. I have an 86-year-old constituent, David Kurts, who has been trying for two years to get services from the government and this department. This is somebody who has served in the navy, the merchant marines and the merchant navy, who has contributed to the public service, has been a contributor and has been denied services for two years. He, undoubtedly, will need to go before an appeal board to get any action. The member for Sackville—Eastern Shore is keeping an eye on this file as I will and we will try to ensure we get a positive resolve.

In light of the government's willingness to consider protecting some of this budget, I want to move the following motion, seconded by the member for Saint-Jean. I move:

That the motion be amended by deleting all the words after "should" and replacing them with the following:

honour the service of Canadian military and RCMP veterans and their families by: (a) committing to not cut Veterans Affairs Canada benefits in the upcoming budget; (b) committing every dollar identified through the Strategic and Operating Review of the department to programs and services for military and RCMP veterans and their families; and (c) providing programs and services to all military and RCMP veterans and their families in a timely and comprehensive manner.

•(1625)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It is my duty to inform hon. 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 Sackville—Eastern Shore if he consents to the amendment being moved.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes.

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour that for the last five years our government has increased its investments for veterans by more than \$200 million and is expected to invest even more in our veterans next year.

The veterans would certainly agree with me that it is important to maintain our benefits to veterans.

I would like to ask the hon. member about his third amendment, which is about responding to our veterans in a timely and comprehensive manner. We agree. Would the member agree that we do not want our veterans to be hindered by red tape? We do not want our veterans to be hindered by a wasteful bureaucracy.

Does the member agree that we need to do the best for our veterans and, in order to do so, we need to streamline our processes, as we are willing to do and as this government has been consistently doing for the last six years by investing in our veterans, not in bureaucracy and red tape?

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, when the minister pats himself, his department and his government on the back, it flies in the face of the words of the veterans ombudsman in February 2012 who said that veterans were not being given adequate reason why their request for disability benefits was being turned down and that they were not getting timely and comprehensive services and programs.

That was not said by the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour. That was said by an officer of this Parliament who is responsible for dealing with this issue on behalf of veterans. He has said, as did the

previous ombudsman and as have auditors general, that the government was not up to snuff.

Even so, my amendment has said that if the government is convinced that it can get savings through operational review, then it should do it but ensure that the services and the programs for veterans in this country do not get cut.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. friend for an amendment to this motion. I would hope that the members of the Conservative Party and all members of this House would now see that this motion should be passed.

The hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore has, as other members have mentioned, been a stalwart defender of the rights of veterans. All of us are very concerned that declining veterans benefits, declining to care properly for our veterans, is a growing national scandal.

I would love to see this amendment pass. I would ask my hon. friend who has moved this motion if he believes that, with this amendment, the motion can have the unanimous consent of this House?

•(1630)

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, the amendment is only intended to hold the government at its word.

Members opposite, including the minister, have spent some time today talking about how the cuts will not affect programs and services for veterans but that they will go forward with the cuts but do it through cuts to red tape and somehow mysteriously finding some savings.

All I want to do, and I think members in this chamber would agree, is ensure that we hold the government's feet to the fire. If it finds, through its operational strategic review, savings, it should ensure it goes directly to the programs and services for veterans so they are not affected.

Members opposite should put their money where their mouth is and get this done. We could then have a unanimous passage of the amendment.

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Mississauga East—Cooksville.

Canadians recognize that the RCMP is Canada's largest police force with a strength of over 20,000 members. In addition to those still serving, there are approximately 15,000 former members of the force who have commenced retirement. We should never forget that these proud men and women have served our country both domestically and internationally with distinction, whether on special assignments in traditional police functions and to protect and to serve Canadians be it at home or abroad.

Business of Supply

How do we provide appropriate care for these officers and retired veterans of the RCMP? What is available to this group as they age and are in greater need of long-term or complex continuing care? Programs in place today allow for benefits for current and retired RCMP regular and civilian members who have sustained permanent work-related illnesses or injury. These benefits are similar to those provided under the Canadian provincial-territorial workmen's compensation regimes administered through Veterans Affairs Canada.

Since 2002, Veterans Affairs Canada has administered the RCMP's disability program that applies to all serving and retired RCMP regular and civilian members, their dependants and survivors. Through this administrative arrangement, Veterans Affairs Canada performs an initial assessment to determine if a disability can be attributed to the RCMP service. Veterans Affairs offers a form of redress for denied claims and serves to analyze applications made for subsequent disabilities and/or a deterioration of an original pension condition.

The RCMP disability pension is designed to compensate a member and/or their dependants if they become disabled or, in the extreme, a member pays the ultimate sacrifice and is killed while on duty. This financial support is in the form of a monthly, tax free, lifetime, indexed payment. Payment can also be granted for pain and suffering, as well as for the loss of life, dependent upon the mitigating circumstances.

Under normal circumstances, a single disability pensioner will receive a smaller monetary benefit than a disability pensioner with dependants. This recognizes that a disability not only affects the individual officer but the financial well-being of the entire family.

Other allowances are available for disability pensioners who require specialty clothing, an amputation or to incorporate a prosthetic limb. Aid is made available for disability pensioners who face challenges performing their daily activities and require assistance to support feeding, bathing, dressing, medication administration and various other day-to-day activities that we take for granted.

The RCMP disability pension provides a wide range of financial support as a pensioner's condition worsens or as they age, deteriorate physically or mentally. The amount of financial benefit paid varies based on the extent of the helplessness, pain, discomfort, loss of enjoyment of life and shortened life expectancy of the pensioner.

We also provide many services to disabled pensioners, including program counselling, case management and assistance referrals to name just a few. The goal is to ensure that these deserving Canadians get the assistance they need.

Basic health care for an RCMP officer is similar to provincial health care coverage and the RCMP supplemental health care is similar to extra coverage that Canadians purchase through their employer or on their own.

When an RCMP member with a work-related disability leaves the force, he or she is no longer covered by the RCMP health regime. The care for the disability condition falls to Veterans Affairs. Former regular member disability pensioners and civilian members, while serving or not, will both receive a VAC health care card indicating

the type of treatment specifically tailored to each disability pensioner.

• (1635)

Veterans Affairs' treatment allowance benefits and services are made available to specifically address conditions for which a disability pension has been rendered. These benefits and services include: daily living aids, such as walkers, canes, et cetera, to improve mobility; ambulance services; audio or hearing devices; in- and out-patient hospital services; nursing services which are critical to their well-being; prescription drugs; related health care services, such as psychological therapy or physiotherapy; special equipment, such as bath lifts, chair lifts, et cetera; and vision care. These services are critical for disability pensioners who have left the force.

I would also like to add that the RCMP has worked closely with the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada with respect to the development of a joint network for operational stress injuries. The RCMP has collaborated with Veterans Affairs and the Canadian Forces in the establishment of sharing of access to operational stress injury clinics right across Canada. This service helps our members who have served our country domestically and internationally.

To clarify what an operational stress injury is exactly, I will provide the definition that an operational stress injury is any persistent psychological difficulty resulting from service related duties performed by a Canadian Forces member or occupational duties for an RCMP member. This includes, but is not limited to, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety disorders.

This co-operation allows the RCMP members to receive care from these very specialized clinics. We are taking care of our people and recognize the impact their duty to their country can have on their well-being.

The RCMP also recognizes that our police officers need additional support when facing personal challenges. Daily, police officers face stressful situations and often see horrific sights. The RCMP has a proactive peer-based employee assistance program. They are a group of trained employees who assist fellow RCMP officers and their families during difficult and stressful times. The RCMP family also takes care of its own when they have passed on by providing some financial support for costs associated with members' funerals.

As an organization, the RCMP continues to review its programs and practices while working closely with Veterans Affairs Canada to ensure that our employees and disability pensioners receive appropriate care.

I thank the House for allowing me the opportunity to outline how the RCMP and Veterans Affairs Canada work together to provide care for disability pensioners of our national police force.

Business of Supply

•(1640)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Mr. Speaker, our international allies, including the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, have made a clear commitment to protect veterans against cuts to programs and services in any governmental strategic reviews. Will this Conservative government do the same, yes or no?

[*English*]

Mr. Rick Norlock: Mr. Speaker, I will respond to the member's question in this way.

We currently are finding savings within the administration of all of the Government of Canada, including every department, including Veterans Affairs.

We are not cutting back on actual services as the opposition infers. As a matter of fact, in one of our budgets, we committed the largest lump sum commitment to veterans services in recent memory. I believe the amount is in the area of \$2 billion, or in excess of \$2 billion. We did that because our veterans deserve no less. We will continue as a government to provide those kinds of services that our veterans of the Canadian armed forces and the RCMP deserve.

For the member and his cohorts to get up and suggest that we are cutting back is somewhat less than factual.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, veterans across the country want real change. One veteran told me that because the compensatory reward was initially withheld, he ended up homeless.

Here are a few more comments from our country's extraordinary heroes in their desperation: "We're all suffering and we need help. It's not only the guys we lose overseas, it's the guys we lose here to suicide. They might as well have died overseas. We've all contemplated it; the thoughts are relentless. When I contemplate suicide, it is relief. It means stopping the pain. No more fights. Telling me my appointment is in one month when I've got two barrels loaded doesn't really do a damn thing, does it?"

Does the hon. member think our veterans need more services and more supports, not less, or a reduction in red tape?

Mr. Rick Norlock: Mr. Speaker, the member has asked me questions before. We are not cutting back on services to veterans as previous Liberal governments did.

However, let me say something about issues surrounding mental health of people who gave their all for this country. We have opened up in the Canadian armed forces special clinics right across this country. We have increased the services for those members and their families who suffer from the stress of separation and the stress of having a member back in their midst, a loved one. Our hearts go out to them. We have brought in special programming, and I mentioned it with regard to the RCMP, specifically designed to treat veterans who are experiencing these problems and more so to have their peers and their supervisors see when their mental health is brought into question before they themselves may even realize it.

We are not cutting back, nor have we cut back, on those services. As I have just said, we have increased those services.

Mr. Dan Harris (Scarborough Southwest, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his speech on the RCMP. My grandfather, George Harris, had the honour and pleasure of being part of the RCMP's musical ride when he served many years ago. Like many other family members, they received services from Veterans Affairs and were well taken care of by Canada. I am proud as a Canadian to say that we did that.

My question for the member is, if there are no cutbacks coming, then why the harm in supporting the motion?

•(1645)

Mr. Rick Norlock: Mr. Speaker, having served 30 years in a deployed police force, I can appreciate the member's family connection to the RCMP and his appreciation for police officers.

People ask why not support this and why not support that. As I have said before, we are going to find ways to improve efficiency right across the breadth of this government, as Canadians expect us to, and that includes every department, including Veterans Affairs.

As the minister stated and as member after member of the government has stated, we are not going to cut back services to veterans. As a matter of fact, we have done just the opposite.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to take part in this debate for several reasons. The motion before us involves an issue of particular importance since it concerns the fate of Canadian Forces veterans and former members of the RCMP. The motion provides us with the opportunity to discuss a subject that our government takes very seriously. It also allows us to illustrate the measures already in place that ensure the well-being of those brave men and women who wear a uniform.

By tabling the motion, the member is implying that our government has been neglecting our responsibilities with respect to our veterans and their families. Nothing is further from the truth. Many other members of our government have talked about the wide array of programs and supports available to veterans and how we continue to increase spending in this area, but so far, no one has touched on the issue of mental health support. I would like to focus my remarks on this topic as I feel it is the area in which we have provided exceptional programs and services to Canada's veterans.

Veterans Affairs Canada, in collaboration with the Department of National Defence, has created a network of 17 mental health clinics across the country to offer specialized services to veterans, and Canadian Forces and RCMP members suffering from operational stress injuries caused by their service. There are currently ten such clinics administered by Veterans Affairs Canada, nine of which are out-patient clinics located in Fredericton, Quebec, Montreal, Ottawa, London, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver. The tenth is the Residential Treatment Clinic for Operational Stress Injuries at Ste. Anne's Hospital. I will take a moment to talk about how these operational stress injuries, OSI, clinics work.

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While continuing to live in their communities, veterans attend appointments at the OSI clinics. They are offered a clinical assessment and a variety of treatment options, including individual therapy, group sessions, psycho-educational sessions, and other resources. The clinics' teams are made up of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, mental health nurses, and other specialized clinicians who understand the experiences and needs of veterans. Loved ones can be involved in the treatment and eligible family members can also receive services. Treatment approaches in OSI clinics are based on best practices and are tailored to meet each client's needs. The team works closely with other health care or community organizations to ensure appropriate follow-up as needed. A referral to other centres may be part of the treatment process depending on the needs of the client. When there are difficulties with addiction or substance abuse, these centres provide specialized treatment.

Telehealth services help ensure that veterans are provided with easier access to emotional support when they need it. Coast to coast support is available to help these brave men and women overcome challenges of complex mental health injuries.

I know the Canadian Forces offers similar support as well through its seven operational trauma and stress support centres.

These new services significantly enhanced the country's support to veterans and their families living with mental health conditions. Today there are more services and programs available than ever before to support them. There are also more front-line health specialists than ever before to ensure the support is effective.

Integrated personnel support centres located on 24 bases and wings give staff from Veterans Affairs Canada and DND the opportunity to offer early intervention and support. Working side by side, the front-line employees from Veterans Affairs Canada and DND develop personalized case plans for each individual veteran to support his or her re-establishment into civilian life.

The two organizations have also created a very successful peer support network called the operational stress injury social support program. Specially trained peer support coordinators who have first-hand experience with operational stress injuries and the loss of loved ones provide vital personal support to Canadian Forces members, veterans and their families.

• (1650)

For those in distress, assistance is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week through the VAC assistance service line. Veterans and their families can access counselling and referral services, including support for mental and emotional health concerns. In addition, more than 4,000 community mental health providers are registered to provide care, support and professional counselling services in veterans' communities.

There are over 200 clinical care managers registered across the country who are dedicated to providing intensive support, daily if required, to veterans with complex needs. There are health professionals, such as occupational therapists and mental health nurses, who build strong support relationships with veterans and their families. They help them follow through on their case treatment plans, help them link to the community resources they may need and

connect them with health professionals who can help them and their families with recovery.

Nearly 15,000 veterans suffering from mental health problems receive some form of assistance or support from the department. Our government takes it very seriously. I want to assure veterans and all members of the chamber that we are fully aware of the importance of our responsibility in this regard. We are not neglecting our duty to these brave men and women. Their dedication throughout this country is a constant reminder that our government, in turn, must serve them with equal devotion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us look at the situation as it currently stands. This government has increased costly tax measures, sometimes by tens and sometimes by hundreds of millions of dollars, for a total of billions of dollars. And that does not include cuts to the GST and corporate taxes. In total, tens of billions of dollars in taxpayers' money is wasted every year, which allows this government to create one artificial crisis after another. The treatment of veterans is an artificial crisis created by this government.

Considering the delays in processing veterans' claims and considering the current system's many shortcomings, will my colleague not vote with us to defend maintaining the current budget at least, if not possibly even increasing it? At the very least, the current budget needs to be maintained in order to avoid cuts.

[*English*]

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Speaker, I would like to repeat what was said in the House many times before. There will be no cuts to services provided for veterans. This government has been increasing the quality of services for veterans. The hon. member may remember that the greatest cuts of services for veterans occurred in 1995 by the previous government. Some of those services were fully restored. Some are being restored by this government. We have been dedicated to providing and enhancing services for veterans. This is what we are doing now.

• (1655)

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague, who is also a member of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, for his remarks and interest on the mental health of veterans.

He rightly pointed out that there are 17 occupational stress injury clinics across the country. My question for the hon. member is this. Should we be satisfied with that? Is that enough? Is the problem of mental health within the veterans community fully and adequately served at that level?

Business of Supply

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Speaker, the answer is very simple. As to whether there is room for improvement, there is always room for improvement. The Minister of Veterans Affairs stated many times that the goal of this government is to improve services for veterans. Of course, there is room for improvement. We are working to improve services, provide more services and continue to provide more and better services to our great men and women in uniform who serve this country.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague for Mississauga East—Cooksville, who came to Canada from Poland, for his excellent speech and for pointing out how important it is to help our veterans who have mental health issues. For that reason, we have 17 clinics that serve 15,000 veterans and their family members. As the member said, we must continue to improve.

Have the veterans in his riding asked him if we should continue to improve our services, especially by reducing red tape? Should we stop burdening our veterans with a bureaucracy that draws out processing times and makes its procedures unwieldy? Have veterans in his riding asked him to cut down on bureaucracy and red tape in order to improve services?

I would also like to thank him for supporting our programs, such as the helmets to hard hats program. Unfortunately, we were not able to count on the support of the NDP. However, I would like to thank the member who supported our veterans.

[*English*]

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Speaker, of course, I am in touch with veterans in my riding. All veterans are looking for services to be simplified. Cutting red tape is very important.

Many veterans are confused with some of the paperwork they have to fill out. Therefore, they have asked that the red tape be cut to simplify the procedures so that they can access their benefits faster. They do not want to spend a lot of time on bureaucracy. Enhancement of these services is required.

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the motion before the House this afternoon. I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for Gatineau.

I would like to begin my comments today on the motion by thanking the member of Parliament for Sackville—Eastern Shore for his sponsorship of this motion and, more than that, for being an unwavering voice and a principled champion of our soldiers, our veterans and, of equal if not greater importance, their families. He already knows this but let me assure him and the House and those listening today that he is not a lone voice. Many of us on this side of the House will be speaking in support of the motion and in support of giving respect to our veterans and their families.

The motion and its call for an exemption of the Department of Veterans Affairs from cuts in the upcoming budget is nothing other than a call on the House to fulfill its part of a bargain made with this country's soldiers, veterans and their families.

The bargain I speak of is not an explicit one. It does not take the form of a legal contract. More important, the terms of the bargain were never even formulated as demands by our soldiers, our veterans

and their families. Their part of the bargain was an offer, not a set of demands, to serve this country recognizing and fully cognizant of the fact that such an offer may ultimately cost them their lives.

To be clear, that is not a bargain just between our country and our soldiers. The family of the soldier, parents, spouse and children are all part of this bargain. The soldier's fate is his or her fate. The soldier's bargain, for better or worse, is his or her bargain.

I was reminded of this early in my tenure as a member of Parliament. I met with the president of a local community service organization in Beaches—East York to talk about the organization, what it does and the services it provides to our community. After that discussion, and recognizing that I was deputy critic of military procurement, he seemed to really want to talk to me about his family and his experience growing up. He lost his father in action in the second world war and his mother faced difficulties raising a family without the father around. He wanted to impress on me his desire that I bring to the House a respect for veterans. He wanted me to be an advocate for veterans to ensure that the spouses and families, the widows and widowers and families of veterans are respected and provided with the services and benefits they so deserve.

This issue of the family came home to me again when I spent four days aboard a frigate through the parliamentary program just this last summer. I had a lot of time to talk to the service members of the Royal Canadian Navy while onboard. The conversation that kept coming up was a personal one about their families. They talked about the difficulties of being a member of the forces and keeping a family together, keeping in touch with their children, keeping their relationships alive.

So, when we provide the uniform and we assume the authority to demand of our soldiers that they meet their part of the bargain and put themselves at risk on demand in the service of our country, we have sealed the bargain. It is up to us to now live up to our part of it.

A veteran is defined on the Canadian Veterans Advocacy web page as someone, whether on active duty, retired or reserve, who at one point in his or her life signed a blank cheque made payable to the people of Canada for an amount up to and including his or her life.

But it is not reasonable, fair or right to accept that offer and not also assume a responsibility on ourselves to firstly, ensure that we never take such an offer lightly or for granted by placing our soldiers in harm's way for anything other than the most critically necessary of circumstances.

Nor is it reasonable, fair or right to accept that offer without making our own promise in return to ensure that our soldiers will forever be treated with respect and will never want for care, and more important, to ensure that their families will forever be treated with respect and never want for care.

• (1700)

In this vein, the Royal Canadian Legion Dominion President, Patricia Varga, wrote a letter to the Prime Minister last fall, appealing for what we are appealing for today by way of this motion. In that letter she talked about our moral debt to our veterans and urged the Prime Minister not to reduce our financial deficit on the backs of our veterans.

Business of Supply

More recently, Brian Forbes, chairman of the War Amps executive committee, wrote a letter to the Minister of Veterans Affairs expressing concerns about the combination of cuts emanating from the department's strategic operational review and the anticipated budgetary reductions. According to Forbes:

Should VAC's budgetary capacity be impacted at this time, it is our considered opinion that the Department will be unable to fund crucial legislative improvements in order to fulfill its ongoing commitment to the overall veterans' community.

In this letter he cites serious outstanding concerns with respect to the traditional veterans programs and the unfinished work and unfulfilled promises with respect to the modern-day veteran. He concludes:

Given these significant concerns, this is clearly no time to be suggesting any diminishment in the budget or resources of VAC. In our judgement, the financial responsibility and debt of gratitude that all Canadians owe to Traditional and Modern Day Veterans should now, and in the future, remain a paramount consideration in any evaluation of a Federal Deficit Reduction Plan.

We have both the Royal Canadian Legion and War Amps Canada saying this, and we have heard already about the position of the Veterans Ombudsman. Moreover, today this party here in this House is calling on the government to follow the lead of other allied nations, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, and exempt Veterans Affairs Canada from cuts in the upcoming budget.

Virtually every day in this House in response to questions on the F-35s, members on the government side rise to accuse the NDP caucus of not supporting our veterans and our men and women in the services. Just today, the Associate Minister of National Defence responded to a question about the F-35s with this comment:

—the only emergency here is the NDP's desire not to help and support our military men and women.

My father was a veteran of the RCAF in the World War II, and although he never talked about his service voluntarily, his sons were incredibly proud of his service. When he died, we draped his coffin with the RCAF flag. We set upon it a picture of my father in his uniform. My father was just one of thousands of veterans who served this country and who should be so respected and honoured.

Today, the rubber hits the road for the government. It has failed already on several occasions but has another chance today to demonstrate in some really concrete and meaningful way that it is living up to its hyperbole, to walk the walk, as we say, and to ensure that the services and benefits of our veterans and their families are sheltered and held safe from the austerity the government is about to visit on this country.

In closing, I would like to add this. A constituent of mine this morning, an associate of the delegation that appeared before the veterans committee last week, requested the following, that if the government truly respects veterans and wants to honour veterans and their families, it remove the member for Calgary West from the veterans committee. He has shown incredible disrespect for the veterans community and undermined the work and effort of those who appeared before the committee to give voice to the serious concerns of the veterans community of this country.

With that, I am happy to answer any questions.

● (1705)

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, over the course of the debate today we have heard government members, including the minister, imply that it is necessary to defeat the motion in order to tackle red tape, that if the motion passes, then veterans would be burdened by red tape.

In my respectful submission, this is nothing more than a red herring. It is entirely possible, in fact it is incumbent upon the government, to tackle red tape whether the motion passes or not.

I invite my hon. friend to offer comments on that observation.

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Mr. Speaker, of course all of us here in this House have a responsibility to ensure that our government functions effectively and provides the services and benefits efficiently to the people who should be in receipt of those benefits.

To the extent there is red tape in Veterans Affairs, then of course I full support the removal of that red tape. To the extent that still exists in Veterans Affairs, I think it is quite an indictment of the government across the way. The Conservatives have had six years in government to remove red tape in that particular department and ensure that our veterans get the services and benefits they so deserve.

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has put forward a very reasoned and balanced amendment to this motion. It is an amendment that would allow us to put our veterans front and centre.

Our Conservative government has already invested some \$2 billion with the enhancements to the new veterans charter. These are enhancements that both opposition parties voted against funding.

Perhaps the opposition member could tell us why he will not accept our amendment that would put our veterans front and centre, instead of constantly putting big union bosses front and centre?

● (1710)

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Mr. Speaker, I am not quite sure where the union bosses come into this debate.

Quite clearly the government has had a number of years to put veterans front and centre, and it has failed to do so. We have a number of validators of that, including the Veterans Ombudsman who talks about the challenge of getting benefits and services to the veterans of this country.

I think it is funny that we talk about a Conservative government that came to change Ottawa, but Ottawa has changed them. All we hear from that side of the House is this bureaucratic language about cuts and red tape, and the removal of such somehow providing benefits for our veterans.

It strains credibility that Veterans Affairs Canada, 90% of whose funds go to funding services and benefits for veterans, could survive cuts and still provide those benefits.

Business of Supply

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is a gentleman watching us from Kingston, Ontario, a former RCMP intelligence officer who is livid at the government, though I will not say what else he said.

His phone number, by the way, is 613-352-8765, because he wants the minister to call him. He wants to tell the Conservatives exactly how RCMP veterans are treated in the Department of Veterans Affairs. He has asked me to request that the minister do so.

Can my hon. colleague tell us why we have to raise these issues over and over again to get the attention of the government to help these men and women who have so greatly served our country?

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for raising the issue of a citizen from Kingston, my home town. I would like to talk to him myself sometime.

As to the answer of why the government fails to respond to veterans and the opposition who supports the veterans, it is a matter of speculation but the government has had six years to do so and has failed miserably. That record of priorities speaks for itself.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, I forgot to mention the gentleman's name. It is Eric Rebiere, at 613-352-8765.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): That is really not a point of order. It is a matter of debate for the House.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Gatineau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in case the minister did not hear it, the person's name is Mr. Ribiere and his phone number is 613-352-8765.

I would first like to thank my colleague from Sackville—Eastern Shore and the member for Québec, who is seconding his motion. I admire my colleague's passion and how, day after day, he makes sure that Parliament does not forget our veterans. This is vital because we deploy them to areas where the conflict is not always clear-cut. We put their lives in danger and, when they return, we can measure the strength of our society by the manner in which we treat them.

I listened to most of the speeches and I must admit that I do not understand why the Conservative government is not able to support a motion that simply says:

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should: (a) honour the service of Canadian military and RCMP veterans and their families [there is nothing shocking about that] by committing to not cut Veterans Affairs Canada in the upcoming budget [and if I understood the minister correctly, the government does not intend to reduce the budgets]; and (b) provide programs and services to all military and RCMP veterans and their families in a timely and comprehensive manner.

This motion makes so much sense that it is almost shameful to say that, at 5:15 p.m. in this House, we are still debating this motion, and there has not been a massive show of support for all our veterans to let them know that we are in favour of this motion.

In Gatineau, in my riding, I have two legions and, every November, I am among those who watch, participate and try to remember. We know that, when we remember our history, we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. We know what all our veterans, all those who gave their lives and all those who returned with physical, emotional or other injuries, did during certain battles. We know what

they did on behalf of our great country of Canada. Remembering once a year with our hands on our hearts so that we do not forget these people is one thing, but taking action is another. It is not very hard to go to the cenotaph with a wreath to remember some of the battles that took place and some of the courageous actions of our veterans. However, making their needs a priority when they return wounded and scarred is another thing. I believe that we are somehow failing miserably as a society when we have to debate the issue before us right now.

In November 2010, I was on Parliament Hill. A few years before that, I was hosting a small radio show in the national capital region and I decided to do something completely different because I had gone to Holland during a trip to Europe. The hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore will appreciate this.

In Holland, I saw the cross-marked graves of all of those Canadian soldiers. I had a chance to talk to some Dutch people who, even at the end of the 1990s, still remembered what our soldiers, our men and women in uniform, did to liberate Europe from the grip of the vilest demon the world has ever known: Hitler. I was so proud to be Canadian, so proud of our people's work and selfless sacrifice.

I returned to Canada. I returned to my radio show, and that November, I decided to do something that my program and station director did not want me to do: observe a minute of silence. For those who do not know, a minute of silence on the radio is quite costly. I was told not to do it. A radio show simply cannot suddenly go absolutely silent for 60 seconds. I am here to say that the minute of silence I observed during my little call-in radio show was the most moving moment of my entire on-air career, and perhaps of my life.

● (1715)

After that, we opened up the phone lines. The way people responded to our 60 seconds of silence was absolutely amazing. People called to say that we do not talk about veterans enough and we are not there for them when they come back with injuries and cannot find a job. When I listen to the people here talk about red tape and this, that and the other thing while people are starving, I am not very proud to be Canadian.

That being said, since that radio moment, the month of November has always been special to me. When I noticed local media reports about a newly formed organization called Canadian Veterans Advocacy and a proposed first Canadian veterans national day of protest in support of veterans' rights, I felt that something was not right. If Canada is taking proper care of its veterans, why is there a need for a national day of protest to raise awareness of normal, ordinary and necessary needs? Something is not right here.

Business of Supply

I decided to take part in this day of protest to speak to people on the ground. I met two extraordinary individuals who really affected my outlook on this issue. The first was Mike Blais, a retiree who founded Canadian Veterans Advocacy and who, like my colleague from Sackville—Eastern Shore, works tirelessly day after day, trying to obtain what should be given automatically without a moment's hesitation. The other person was the former veterans' ombudsman, Pat Stogran. A few months earlier, in July 2010, he had given a press conference to denounce how poorly we treat our veterans. A few days after that, he lost his job, which was no surprise.

The person who replaced him said the same thing, which is terribly sad: veterans still do not have access to services. We have been asking questions of the members opposite all day today. They say they have invested money here and there, but none of them can look at the cameras with a straight face and say that our veterans have exactly the services they deserve. The rest is gibberish, to say the least. It is an affront to those who fought on the front lines, not knowing if they would come home. Considering that there is no greater sacrifice in life, if our society does not ensure that they can live decently and in dignity upon their return and that they can get services, it will have failed miserably.

We hear the government constantly saying that it is here for our soldiers and for the army and that the opposition does not support the army. However, the facts reveal the reality, and the reality is that the Conservative members across the floor are going to rise tomorrow around 6 p.m. and vote against this motion and the amendment, and I find that shameful. The Conservatives should be ashamed of themselves.

• (1720)

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a few questions for the hon. member for Gatineau. Of course there is a motion, but members can truly make a difference by supporting bills and budget initiatives. She mentioned that when she spoke to veterans on November 11, Remembrance Day, she told them that it is important to take action in the House. How does she explain to them that the NDP refuses to take action for veterans in the House, even to support the creation of an ombudsman whose role is to protect the interests of veterans? Why was the NDP opposed to creating this ombudsman? Why did they vote against money for improving the lives of modern-day veterans, the most seriously injured veterans? How does she explain to them that she voted against opening five clinics to treat operational stress disorders? She was talking to us about mental health. As a member of Parliament, it is important to take action here.

Are veterans telling my colleague that it is important to take action in this House by supporting the Conservative government's initiatives? Are veterans also telling her that we need to cut red tape? Our veterans deserve first-class service and we have to cut red tape for them.

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Mr. Speaker, these types of comments and questions are so typical of the Conservatives. They always include tons of things in the budget, but often, it is not enough. Needs are great, but the Conservatives constantly ask us to vote with them on half-measures. It is unacceptable. Why accept something that is a slap in the face and worth absolutely nothing? Even veterans are saying that this is not what they need. The minister can give all kinds

of examples, but one fact remains. Why do we need to have veterans advocacy? Why do we need to have a veterans ombudsman who, year after year, writes reports that are not very flattering for the government?

I do not accept the examples the Conservatives are tossing around to satisfy their need to explain the inexplicable.

• (1725)

Mr. Tarik Brahmi (Saint-Jean, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I truly appreciated the speech by the member for Gatineau. I would like her reaction to the second item, the amendment we moved to this motion. If the government truly wishes to cut costs, we suggest that the amounts cut be reallocated to benefits that will help those who need them. If they really want to reduce the amount of paperwork and cut red tape, we suggest that the resulting savings be redistributed. I would like hear her to comments on these suggestions.

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Saint-Jean has posed an excellent question. I appreciate his work and I know how important this issue is for him. Now that my colleague for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour has moved an amendment to the motion by my colleague from Sackville—Eastern Shore, the Conservatives have no reason to object to the motion. If they are right about there being too much red tape, that is one thing. However, the savings should not be used to purchase F-35 jets—when we do not even know if they will be operational—or to give tax cuts to big business because the government coffers are empty. The savings must be used to meet the needs of our veterans. I will say it again, veterans are saying that they lack services.

It is a fantastic amendment that pulls the rug out from under the Conservatives. I am convinced that those watching today believe that the Conservatives will not dare to vote against the amended motion tomorrow.

[English]

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for West Nova.

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss how our government cares for and supports Canada's men and women in uniform, our veterans and their families. I feel strongly about the importance of caring for and recognizing a group of individuals that has sacrificed so much, but had asked for so little in return from our nation.

Our government is providing veterans with the support they need, when and where they need it. That includes supporting them as they make the transition from military to civilian life.

The members of the House are all aware of the unprecedented amount of money budgeted over the last six years to support veterans, be it for the implementation of the new veterans charter and its enhancements, the expansion of the veterans independence program, or the network of operational stress injury clinics located across Canada. All of these efforts will make a lasting difference.

Business of Supply

What about the families of veterans, those who may not wear a uniform but serve our country nonetheless? They are the strength and foundation of the Canadian Forces member both while in service and when he or she transitions back to civilian life.

When an individual joins the Canadian Forces, he or she does so by choice. However, that choice can take a heavy toll on the family of the veteran. Whether it is being left alone while their loved one is deployed or trying to transition to civilian life after years of being a military family, in many cases, it is the spouses and caregivers who provide stability and balance at home while the veteran recovers and finds her or his place in the civilian world.

Our government understands that and that is why we are proud supporters of the new veterans charter.

When the charter was first introduced in 2006, its goal was to get the best results for our veterans and their families. I want to stress that it is for our veterans and their families. The needs and expectations of these veterans and their families are evolving. As the minister has clearly stated, we need to evolve with them. To keep the status quo would be an enormous disservice to those who have put their lives on the line for our country. Therefore, in recent years our government has made substantial changes to the programs and services to bring about the well-being and stability of our veterans in their civilian lives.

I want to take the opportunity this debate presents to look at what we are also doing for our military families and to remind Canadians that these families deserve our support and respect.

The best example of this care and support provided comes in the form of case management and rehabilitation services available to veterans and how the family plays a major part in developing their individual case plans. It is crucial that spouses, parents, children, or ideally all of those individuals, be full partners in a veteran's recovery. They are a critical support system, and they need to know what their loved ones are going through, how they are progressing and how the family can help. They are involved every step of the way through the transition process.

At the same time, families also need to know that there is help for them to have their own support systems. The military family resource centres are wonderful places to start, as is our network of family peer support coordinators. I had the great privilege of meeting with many of them last week.

Both Veterans Affairs Canada and the Department of National Defence have created a very successful network known as the operational stress injury social support program. Specially trained peer support coordinators who have first-hand experience with operational stress injuries and the loss of loved ones provide vital personal support. We met with the spouses of veterans and we met with the spouses of Canadian armed forces members. These are the very folks providing the peer-to-peer counselling. Family members have said that having someone to talk to who has already been there is incredibly supportive and comforting.

Our government has also invested more money in the network of operational stress injury clinics. These are the clinics that serve our veterans and Canadian armed forces members who are suffering from post traumatic stress disorder. Veterans Affairs Canada and

National Defence have worked together on this initiative to create a network of 17 mental health clinics throughout the country. While continuing to live in their community, veterans attend appointments at the OSI clinic. They are offered a clinical assessment and a variety of treatment options, including individual therapies, group sessions, psycho education sessions and other resources.

● (1730)

The clinical teams are made up of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, mental health nurses and other specialized clinicians who understand the experience and needs of our veterans. The team works closely with other health care and community organizations to ensure that there is appropriate follow up within our communities. Loved ones can be involved in the treatment and eligible family members can also receive these services.

As of today, there are 10 of these clinics operated by Veterans Affairs Canada. The Canadian Forces offers its support through 7 operational trauma and stress support centres. Support like this brings back stability and strength to the family unit. As a result, veterans can make better use of the other services we provide, services such as career counselling, vocational assistance and job placement. The spouse of a deceased or severely injured veteran can get the training he or she needs to find work and help bring financial stability back to the family unit if the veteran is unable to benefit from these services. That means everyone can focus on what matters most: getting better and getting stronger.

The initiatives I have mentioned represent only a few of the actions taken by our Conservative government to provide assistance to Canada's veterans and their families. When it comes to easing the transition from military service to the civilian world, we believe families, first and foremost, are the most critical social support system. Knowing their families' interests are important, understood and supported keeps our existing forces strong.

I want to assure Canadians, veterans, servicemen and women and their families that we are working hard to provide them with the services and benefits when they need them and where they need them.

● (1735)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for her speech.

There are good intentions in her speech. However, I note that, although the current Conservative government claims to support our troops, it abandons them at the earliest opportunity with irresponsible budget cuts, the refusal to pay benefits, and the disclosure of confidential medical information about veterans who stand up for others. When will the Conservatives stop attacking our veterans?

Business of Supply

[English]

Ms. Eve Adams: In fact, Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. Our government takes the privacy of our veterans very seriously. When it comes to providing benefits to our veterans, it is our Conservative government that has actually enhanced the benefits available to our most severely disabled veterans.

I find it amusing that the opposition party would even raise this issue, considering it consistently votes against funding enhanced benefits to our most seriously disabled veterans. Frankly, it should be ashamed of itself and its track record.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I heard the parliamentary secretary in the course of her remarks say that to keep the status quo would be an immense disservice to our veterans and yet the amendment proposed by the government side is to maintain veterans' benefits. I am not an English major but I am having a little trouble trying to figure out the difference between status quo and maintain.

Why not take the savings that will be encountered through the strategic and operating review and fund the veterans transition program? The hon. member saw this program first-hand. It is an excellent program that is receiving nothing from the government. Why not plow the savings from the strategic and operating review into the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research? Why not? Is the status quo—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Speaker, the Liberals had some 13 years to do right by veterans and never did. They did nothing on agent orange ex gratia payments. It took our Conservative government to fund that. They never once created the Office of the Ombudsman. It was actually the Conservative government that created the Office of the Ombudsman. It was the Conservative government that brought in the bill of rights for veterans.

Our Conservative government constantly stands by veterans. Our simple proposal today is that we will maintain all benefits for veterans. However, any savings to be found by eliminating inefficiencies in our bureaucracy ought to be had immediately. I do not understand why the opposition would not support such a simple premise.

Mr. David Wilks (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am thankful to the Minister of Veterans Affairs for all that he does for this country.

As a retired member of the RCMP, I am much appreciative of the benefits that I receive yearly on behalf of Veterans Affairs. More important, what I would like the parliamentary secretary to expound upon is this. My son served in the last combat mission in Afghanistan from November 2010 to July 2011. I was blessed with the fact that we were phoned every month to ensure how our family was doing while he was serving overseas. I wonder if the member could again explain some of the programs that are available to the families while their loved ones are serving overseas.

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his service to our nation, as well as that of his son. It is very much appreciated.

Putting our families front and centre is a priority for our government. While Canadian Forces members are serving overseas, the stress that is put upon their family members back home is sometimes unbearable. We have created a number of peer-to-peer support centres for these family members to offer them assistance and support.

More important, we want to ensure that we offer some assistance to our veterans when they return home to transition back into civilian life. Our committee has actually been focusing on that in the last weeks.

● (1740)

Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is an incredibly important discussion that we are having today. I will begin by making something very clear, and I think my colleagues on the committee would agree. I do not think there is a member in this House who does not support our veterans. I think every elected member understands the importance of what these great people have done for our country. Whatever disagreements we may have, I think they are in the spirit of how we can make it better and how we can continue to support our veterans. I just wanted to get that on the record because we do not always agree on everything.

I also want to point out that tomorrow is an important day. It is the day when the minister appears before the committee to discuss the main estimates. It will be a very fulsome, public discussion about what will take place and what will not. I want to get it on the record again, as the minister said many times, there will be no reductions in services to veterans. Legally, we cannot do that. As a government, we will fully support the services that are provided to veterans. Whatever else goes on, whatever one wants to add to it, that is a different kind of discussion. However, we need to be clear that there will be no reduction in the budget in terms of services to veterans in Canada. We just would not do that.

I will also point out, as I am supposed to use some of the document prepared for me, and make mention of the fact that there are some important anniversaries coming up. Part of what we do is commemorate what our veterans have done. We know that next month there is a special anniversary and special celebrations for the 95th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. It is one of four important battles but this one is special because it really showed that Canada was becoming a nation recognized around the world.

On April 8, some 500 cadets will gather here in Ottawa. It is very touching and moving ceremony. They hold an all night vigil in recognition of the tomb of the unknown soldier. If people are around, I would encourage them to go. One of the great things we have seen in recent years is the take up among young Canadians of what veterans and the military mean to our great nation. Every year they are showing up in greater numbers showing their understanding of the importance of what our veterans have done. That is certainly an important event.

Business of Supply

Also, and I thought one of these years I might get to go, but the minister will lead a delegation to France with some 5,000 students and a number of veterans and military representatives. They will be able to see that very special place and to commemorate with our great Canadians how important not only the monument is but the whole event, the whole recognition of Canada being recognized in France for what we have done. We certainly think that is important. I just want to remind members that this coming up next month.

As well, there are a number of other programs and services. I want to touch on those because I think we overlook things sometimes. I think anybody on the committee would agree that this year we had a number of great witnesses come in. Many have started initiatives on their own or in partnership with the department. In every case, there is phenomenal growth in the services taking place for veterans in Canada. There is a whole recognition.

I know my colleague from Sackville—Eastern Shore remembers when we saw the peer group come before us a couple of years ago. There is a whole recognition of all the new challenges that veterans face, whether they be physical, mental, financial or whatever. I see continued progress taking place. I think a lot of it is in recognition of their service, although there were cuts that took place in the mid-1990s, which was unfortunate and it took a long time to bring them back, but now it is a matter of continued growth and recognition.

A former minister said quite often, and it is so true, that we can never do enough for our veterans. I think that will always be the case, but we can never stop trying. We can never stop listening. We can never stop reaching out and telling them how much they mean to our great nation.

Even though we may disagree on the timing of that, it is important to remember that the efforts that are being made show that every year there is an improvement over the year before.

We also know there are a lot of veterans who need special care and special attention. I know the talk has been about cutbacks, reductions and so on. I think the test will be when the budget comes in. I will just smile as I look at my colleague and say that this is the year for him to vote for the budget and to support the veterans in a meaningful way.

It would be so marvellous to see my colleague stand up that day and say that it may not be everything, that it may not be all that we want, but that the government is doing the right things for the veterans of Canada. I want to hear the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore stand up and, with great praise and great enthusiasm, do that.

• (1745)

All kidding aside, it is important to note that as we look at the issues we are facing and the issues to come, the modern vets need special recognition. I would agree with many of the points made over recent years that there were problems, whether it was regarding privacy or other issues. The fact is there has been a response to those, and a continued response is necessary.

It has been pointed out by other members that not just recognizing the services, but as the department becomes more efficient, more of the money should be spent on the veterans and less of the money should be spent on bureaucracy.

We will not get into a debate about the things that should stay or go; that will continue in the years to come. However, I will tell members one thing. Whatever we end up doing, as colleagues in this House, we have to keep trying and every day of every year we have to remember what these people have done.

The modern vets are coming home. As I said earlier about one of the meetings we had a couple of years ago, these peer support groups are becoming so important. There are homeless vets. There are a lot of problems that vets face. We have learned that the best approach is for someone who has been in their shoes to be the lead and the contact with veterans. They will make the contact and will bring them in. This is something that probably I and most of us could not do. They have been there. They have suffered. They understand and they want to help. We have to listen to these people. We have to support these people. We have to ensure they are given the supports they need. That is our job. I see a lot of opportunity for improvement there.

I have probably left a few things out that were in my notes, but I did want to take this opportunity to say that tomorrow is an important day. The minister is going to be with us at the committee. The committee members will have an opportunity to go into detail, but please let it be with the full understanding and comprehension that we start by saying there will be absolutely no reduction in services to veterans. We just will never let that happen.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments of my colleague from Nova Scotia. If I may say in a non-partisan way, he does an excellent job as chair of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs and for that I am greatly appreciative.

He said that we need to do more and we could never do enough. He is right. The reality is that in some cases the disabled veteran or family member is 86 years old, 90 years old, 97 years old. I raised the case of Mr. Dionne from North Vancouver in the House. Does the member honestly think for a second that a 97-year-old veteran who just had a pacemaker put in at a hospital and his 89-year-old wife should be told that the department will get back to them in 16 weeks if it may help them? This is just one of thousands of issues we deal with on a regular basis.

Does the member not think the answer should be that the department will help them immediately and that the paperwork can be filled in later? Does he not think that would be a much better way to go?

Mr. Greg Kerr: Mr. Speaker, I agree in principle, obviously. How would a person disagree with respect to a veteran of that age?

I would also remind members that every year we see the numbers of satisfied veterans, in terms of getting service and support, going up. The vast majority of veterans get the services that they want and need.

Business of Supply

There are these that certainly deserve our attention. We have to focus more on the eligibility question. They deserve the benefit of the doubt. I do not argue at all. Also, the member knows that we are seeing the wait times actually begin to shorten. That is one of the major commitments to take place. All of us as members have been frustrated when dealing with veterans matters to see how long it has taken sometimes to get an answer, positive or negative, but certainly we want to continue. On that point, we would certainly agree.

• (1750)

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I, too, would like to commend the hon. member for his work as the chairman of our committee. I know that I have not made it particularly easy for him. It would be great if more of the committee business was done in public. However, he is a good man, doing a good job.

He said in the course of his remarks that tomorrow is a very important day because the committee is going to consider the main estimates. He also said that legally we cannot reduce the amount that is being paid for veterans benefits.

Is he prejudging the outcome of the vote tomorrow? Does the committee not have the right to examine the numbers that come before it, to discuss them and to decide whether or not to pass them? If they are legally bound, what are we meeting for tomorrow?

Mr. Greg Kerr: Mr. Speaker, I hope I did not misunderstand my colleague from Charlottetown. What I said was that we were legally bound to maintain the level of service for veterans. I hope he is not suggesting that at tomorrow's meeting any member of the committee would talk about reducing support to the veterans, to actually reduce the amount of money going to veterans. I am not trying to be presumptuous of the committee, but this side of the House is going to absolutely vote to support and maintain the programs and services available to the veterans of Canada.

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to add my voice to those of the two official critics, to commend the work of our chair of the veterans affairs committee. As well, I commend the work of the whole committee, which has provided an excellent report on remembrance as we approach the centennial of the First World War, which is very important.

The member raised the issue of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. This is at the very heart of our country. I wish every member and every Canadian could seize the sacrifices made by those Canadians at that time.

Tomorrow, I will be more than happy to appear in front of the committee where I will present an additional budget of \$43 million that will be required for the current fiscal year. I will also be seeking support for an additional \$3.5 billion in the main estimates for next year. I hope I will get the support of the member as well.

My question for the chair of the committee is this. Today we have a motion, but is it not more important to vote when there are budget initiatives? What can we expect from a party that is consistently voting against veterans? Should we not be more proactive and support our veterans?

As we heard, the member is asking for streamlining of processes so we have more money for veterans and less for bureaucracy.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Mr. Speaker, I was getting a lot of helpful advice around this corner of the House, so I may not have the full intent, but I did get the sense about voting for the budget. It is kind of a segue to say, first, I heard one comment. No, I was not at Vimy Ridge. I did not see it personally, although I may be older than some members.

I absolutely agree that the real test is in the budget itself. The Minister of Finance, when he brings that great document forward, is one more member of the House who is totally aware of and supportive of veterans.

I know the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore will have to really contain his enthusiasm when he votes in favour of the budget that comes in this year. I look forward to that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, knowing that several members wish to address this matter, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Burnaby—New Westminster.

Last week, I had the opportunity to experience one of the rare moments of unanimity in this House, when we all agreed to support Shannen's dream. These kinds of issues should always have our unanimous support, because their importance is indisputable. The same goes for how we should treat our military and RCMP veterans and their families.

I would remind the House that politicians do not take part in combat or peacekeeping operations, but we are the ones who decide on the missions that, quite often, jeopardize the health, if not the very lives of our men and women in uniform. Our soldiers defend our values and our freedom on behalf of all Canadians, because that is what we ask them to do. All members in the House carry a great deal of responsibility on their shoulders when they decide to send our troops into a foreign operational theatre, and members should be particularly careful about the respect, treatment and consideration our soldiers deserve.

We owe it to our veterans to remember, and this duty goes beyond the respect shown at Remembrance Day ceremonies. Our respect should be shown through concrete actions that constantly reflect the sacrifices made by our veterans so that we can all live comfortably in a world of freedom and justice.

I am very surprised at our government's attitude toward our veterans. The government has been making one funding announcement after another related to its plans to celebrate a war that happened a very long time ago. Our ministers seem much more interested in commemorating the War of 1812 and the soldiers who died in it than they are in the reality of today's veterans. We are uncomfortable with the extraordinary emphasis the government is putting on that long-ago conflict and the money it is spending to celebrate it. Nation-building means recognizing those who are currently contributing to Canada's presence on the world stage by participating in our diplomacy and military action.

Business of Supply

In another sphere of activity, RCMP veterans also deserve recognition through action, not just words. We are just weeks away from a federal budget, but it seems the Conservatives have once again chosen equality over fairness. I will use a very simple example to explain the difference.

If a teenager and I share a pizza equally for dinner, we each get half. After dinner, the teenager is definitely still going to be hungry because he needs more food to fuel his growth, while I will probably have eaten too much and raised my cholesterol level. Equal shares may have seemed like a good idea at the time. Were we to do things differently and share the pizza fairly, neither the teenager nor I would still be hungry at the end of the meal.

Why choose that example? Because for months, the message the government has been sending is that everyone has to fork over their 5% or 10% contribution to the national treasury. Applying such a simplistic formula is not a courageous political agenda. Governing is not just about doing a little math to come up with a budget. It is also about making fair choices to meet the needs of every group and explaining why it is fair. The government must behave courageously.

A simplistic approach might be to say that every veteran who passes away should correspond to a decrease in the credits on this budget line, but that would be to forget that Canadians want a fairer society. They want the government to be there for those who served and even sacrificed their lives. What is more, the needs of today's veterans are very different from yesterday's veterans. War has changed and when veterans return, they need the appropriate care and services for each individual: both veterans and their families.

We are dealing with a new generation of veterans, many of whom are coming home with new psychological disorders. Indeed, this costs money, but that budgetary effort should be a given. A new generation of veterans means a new kind of care for them. Here are some ways the reality is so different: the declining average age of soldiers needing services and the rising number of years during which they need those services; the consequences of choosing combat missions over peacekeeping missions; the growing use of reservists; I will stop there because I do not have enough time.

The NDP is making very reasonable requests and showing increased sensitivity toward veterans and RCMP veterans, while remaining aware of the current economic situation. That is what it means to make choices.

• (1755)

As a result, the NDP is making two requests. First, it is asking for a guarantee that the Department of Veterans Affairs will be exempt from the cuts in the 2012-13 budget. Second, it is asking for a guarantee that all military and RCMP veterans and their families will have access to programs and services in a timely and comprehensive manner.

I would like to remind those who think this measure is excessive that, in 2011, the President of the United States, Barack Obama, committed to not making any cuts to programs for veterans at the very time when Congress and the administration were seeking to balance the budget. The United Kingdom and Australia did the same, so why not Canada?

In addition, according to all the government ministers and many economic analysts, Canada is the G8 country that fared the best during the economic crisis. The budget cuts that the government has been announcing for many months are controversial. It even seems that they may not be very effective or even useless. Given these circumstances, we certainly have the means to recognize military and RCMP veterans.

In addition to our two requests, we also have a number of recommendations to make to improve services for the clients targeted by this motion, such as developing health care centres of excellence for modern veterans, more access to veterans' hospitals, reforms to the new veterans charter, an increase in funeral expenses—a last show of respect if ever there was one—and action on veterans' homelessness.

In short, the NDP wants to implement a system that will change with the changing needs of military and RCMP veterans. In this case, as in many others, the Conservative government is unfortunately the champion of half measures.

Although the Prime Minister promised, when he was the leader of the opposition, that a Conservative government would immediately extend the veterans independence program to all widows of World War II and Korean War veterans, regardless of when the veteran died or the period in which he received benefits before he died, the measures that have been put in place have resulted in the creation of two categories of widows.

The same approach has been taken with Agent Orange. Not only has the government created different classes of victims—with some receiving benefits and others not—but effective December 31, 2011, the department is no longer accepting applications for lack of program funding. Can we really put a deadline on compensation owed to victims suffering from medical problems associated with the use of Agent Orange?

The same battle is being fought by veterans exposed to radiation, and the list goes on.

At a time when the government is preparing to spend recklessly, without even batting an eyelash, to equip the military with a plane that is unproven and whose costs that continue to spiral upwards, should we not ensure that our soldiers who return home are treated as well as they have served our country abroad? That is the recognition and the respect that we owe our men and women in uniform.

The people we represent are all waiting for this type of action, which allows them to believe in their institutions and, above all, in the value of the politicians they have elected.

I am pleased to have joined in this discussion, and I hope that together we will find the means to meet the expectations of our military and RCMP veterans and their families.

Business of Supply

•(1800)

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to commend the hon. member for his speech on this very important day in the House of Commons.

Like me, the hon. member must certainly return to his riding for Remembrance Day, and I am sure that he has noticed that the number of veterans of past wars is getting smaller each year.

I would like the hon. member to tell me what will happen to our current military personnel when they need services if the Minister of Veterans Affairs makes the cuts we have been talking about today.

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, this year, when I went to participate in the Remembrance Day ceremonies for the first time as a member of Parliament, the biggest surprise for me was to feel as though I were being welcomed as a hero when the veterans are the ones who deserve all the credit.

In most of the informal conversations that I had with new generation of veterans after the ceremonies, they told me that they were concerned because they have trouble obtaining services and they have to justify the health problems they experience as a result of wanting to serve their country. It is completely unacceptable.

I hope that the government will have the decency not to cut the services provided to veterans or the department's budget.

•(1805)

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the fact that my colleague reminded us that last week, the House adopted a unanimous motion concerning Shannen's dream. As he so aptly put it, the same principle applies here when talking about issues that should transcend politics.

However, we are being accused of fearmongering on this issue. The Conservatives assure us that there will be no cuts. However, they refuse to tell us whether, yes or no, they will vote in favour of the motion and that there really will be no cuts. Everyone should be able to vote in favour of the motion.

I wonder if my colleague could comment further on the very serious implications of any budget cuts regarding veterans.

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, perhaps our friends know more about the budget than we do on this side of the House. It is very difficult to speculate on the contents of the budget that will be presented on March 29. However, what matters to all Canadians is that there are as many unanimous votes as possible in this House.

If the government really does not have any cuts planned in its budget that will affect veterans, why not prove it immediately and use this motion as an opportunity to show all Canadians, once again, that it is possible for us to work together in this House, in the best interest of our citizens?

[English]

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I suggest to the member across the way that he take a look at the main estimates. He could come to the veterans affairs meeting tomorrow afternoon to take a look. It is not a secret. It is \$3.5 billion. Ninety per cent of the money in the budget goes toward benefits and services. It is no secret. It is right there.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for the invitation. Unfortunately, I have to attend the Standing Committee on Official Languages at that time. Otherwise, I would have been happy to go and examine the issue.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we have debated the important issue of veterans all day. The hon. members for Sackville—Eastern Shore and Québec began the debate this morning. Evening has come and no one on the government side has clearly said whether the government will support our motion, which is designed to prevent cuts to services for veterans.

Mr. Speaker, I will go through you to ask these questions of all the members on the government side. Why are they so reluctant to support a motion that is just common sense? Why are they taking so long to clearly state that they fully support the motion, which requests that the same level of services for veterans be maintained in the budget? This is a legitimate question that must be asked. Why have they not answered? We have been debating this issue for eight hours and we have not received an answer.

On this side of the House, we are concerned. It is certain that veterans' families are concerned. People in veterans' hospitals, in families and in homes where veterans live are all surprised at the government's lack of clarity.

The hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore asked some questions in the House today. I am tempted to ask the Conservatives whether or not they support veterans. It is a legitimate question to which we still have not had an answer and that is quite worrisome.

It is not just the NDP that supports veterans. All the veterans organizations around the country, like the Royal Canadian Legion, to which a number of NDP MPs and I belong, fully support this motion and this debate today to support veterans. The union of veterans' affairs employees and the veterans ombudsman also support this motion.

Why is the Conservative government not prepared to support this motion after eight hours of debate? All they have to do is stand up and say they agree with the NDP that the services provided to veterans need to be protected.

Quotes were read earlier and I will also read one in these few minutes I have to devote to veterans. Patricia Varga, Dominion President of the Royal Canadian Legion, said:

It is time that our federal leadership owned up to the moral debt they owe to the veterans and their families. They can do that by saying cut if you can but do not touch programs or operations that have any effect on Canada's veterans.

Guy Parent, the veterans ombudsman, said roughly the same thing. He said that if the United States and the United Kingdom can exempt veterans' programs, Canada should do the same. He added that either the Conservatives should do the same thing or they should ensure that cuts are kept to a minimum.

Business of Supply

It is very clear. There is consensus throughout the country, among the people watching today, in the NDP, and among all veterans' organizations. We must ask the following question: do the Conservatives support veterans or not? It is a fairly simple question.

• (1810)

[*English*]

I want to continue talking about the incredible moral debt Canadians owe to our veterans.

I grew up in a family that sent two individuals off to the second world war. My grandfather and my uncle are placed at the monument in front of New Westminster City Hall in my community of New Westminster. They both gave their lives for their country. As with so many Canadians, we feel deeply and profoundly about the debt that we owe the veterans who came back.

As the House well knows, war comes with huge physical, mental, often psychological consequences to our veterans. One cannot go to those kinds of situations and come back unscarred. These brave men and women who have served overseas in the second world war, in the Korean conflict, in multiple peacekeeping operations that Canada has undertaken or in Afghanistan deserve only the best that Canada has to offer. They put their lives on the line. Many of them gave their lives. Those who come back are entitled to the full support of our nation. That is why we find it so perplexing that after seven hours of debate here in the House today the Conservative government has not even signalled yet whether it is going to support the motion or not.

Every year on Remembrance Day I go before the New Westminster cenotaph—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I am sorry to interrupt the hon. member for Burnaby—New Westminster. There is too much noise in the chamber. I would humbly ask members to carry on their conversations in their respective lobbies.

We will give the hon. member for Burnaby—New Westminster the floor.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, I am saddened that some members are not listening to this debate. I know that many Canadians and many veterans value this debate. Without our veterans, we would not be having this democratic debate on the floor of the House of Commons. We owe it to them to listen very attentively. We owe it to them to listen to their needs.

All of the major veterans organizations have come forward and said the government should be supporting the NDP motion, every single one without exception. They understand the contributions that veterans have made to building the country and to preserving the right to a democratic debate in the House of Commons. Veterans who have given their lives or have come back profoundly scarred, sometimes physically, sometimes psychologically, have the right to get the best possible services from a grateful nation.

Every Remembrance Day I go to the George Derby Centre in Burnaby and visit the veterans. I listen to their stories. I see what has happened over time. It is a slow but steady deterioration in the funding that is allocated to that veterans hospital and other veterans hospitals across the country. It is clear and unmistakable. That is why we brought forward the motion today. We understand that the slow,

steady and insidious cuts to funding cannot be permitted to continue. We have to provide full support for our veterans, wherever they are in Canada. We do this today with the full support of those veterans organizations.

As members know, in the estimates there were cutbacks. The government would say that it only cut back certain categories, but unmistakably, and we have raised this in the House of Commons, there were cutbacks of millions of dollars in funding to Veterans Affairs. The government is aware of this. It has said even further that it will be looking to make major cuts in ministries, including the Ministry of Veterans Affairs. We could be talking about tens of millions of dollars.

How does that translate? That translates into fewer services available to veterans. It translates into fewer services available anywhere veterans are now receiving the support of a grateful population, whether that be the George Derby Centre in Burnaby, British Columbia, or Ste. Anne's Hospital in Quebec. We will draw that line in the sand to stop further cuts. We want to maintain those services. We want to put forth a motion to the House of Commons that unambiguously states that the cuts, as insidious as they may be, shall stop now, and that the next budget will provide full funding for veterans. We are standing up for veterans in the House of Commons because we can do so. We can stand in the House of Commons and debate because of their sacrifice.

Today we are asking for support from every single member of Parliament to say yes to veterans, to say no to cuts, and to say yes to maintaining the funding for our veterans who have given their lives and often their physical health for this country. They are owed that debt. We owe them no less than full funding in the next budget and no cuts.

We hope that all members of Parliament will support this motion.

• (1815)

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as someone whose uncle, “Smokey” Smith, was the last surviving Victoria Cross holder in Canada, and whose father was a prisoner of war, I have listened very carefully to this debate. I know there is a lot of truth in what the hon. member said. Certainly, my father returned with what I would say are psychological scars. The fact that he carried on a very successful life and was a hero to me and a lot of other people does not take away from that sacrifice.

At the same time, I would ask the hon. member to consider the following and answer the following question. Of course veterans are near and dear to the hearts of most Canadians. Apart from that, is he excluding the possibility that there may be savings in that department as there are in other departments? In times of austerity, we have to look at making those savings so that we can support our veterans in a more effective way. I would put to my hon. friend that this is not to take away from our veterans but to stand up for the very values that they care about. We need to preserve the treasury so that we can serve them and all Canadians better in every possible respect.

Business of Supply

● (1820)

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his question. Certainly the members on this side of the House share his family's sacrifice and contribution to Canada's roles overseas.

That being said, I must say as a former financial administrator that I am beside myself with the priorities I see being advanced by the government and where it wants to spend money. The F-35s were untendered. They have grown from a budget of \$9 billion to \$30 billion, perhaps \$40 billion. We have no idea. No one on the government side or the opposition side of the House has any idea of how many tens of billions of dollars those planes will cost. They were not even tendered. The prison agenda put forward by the government at a time when the crime rate is falling has been evaluated upwards of \$19 billion.

Those are expenditures we believe can be cut back on. Those are expenditures that we believe have to be fine-tuned, certainly re-tendered. There should be a tendering process for the F-35s, the F-18 replacements. That is what needs to happen. However, we are unalterably opposed to cutting back on services for our veterans.

I believe the member is in good faith. We hope that he will vote in favour of this motion that we are bringing forward in the House tomorrow.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague mentioned the hospital in his riding. Here is something that the Conservatives have yet to admit, but it is a fact. When the last Korean overseas veteran dies, the 10,000 contract beds in the hospital the member spoke about will no longer be available for all those veterans from 1953 onwards. Ste. Anne's Hospital, the last federal veterans hospital, is being transferred to Quebec. There go 1,300 federal jobs—gone. Plus, an estimated 500 jobs will be gone.

We have thousands upon thousands of veterans who will be requiring long-term care. What will happen? The government, although it will never admit it, will download that responsibility onto the backs of the provinces. So when the government says that it is not cutting, that is simply not true.

I would like my hon. colleague's comments on that please.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, first I would like to praise the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore. There is no stronger advocate for veterans in this country than the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore. He proves that every day. He proved it again today in question period and in his presentation in the debate. He is aware of how insidiously we are seeing the government cut back.

When I go to the George Derby Hospital, I see those men and women who have given so much for this country. I see the insidious ways that things are gradually deteriorating, how things are gradually being cut back. I say that the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore is absolutely right, there are more cuts to come unless members of this Parliament take a very clear decision to tell the government that we do not want any more cuts. We want to preserve services for veterans. They deserve our respect. We owe them no less than providing those services each and every day.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to participate in this debate. I do not know,

but is there some sort of irony in the fact that we are debating cutbacks to veterans in the middle of the so-called robocall scandal? If we were to ask veterans why they went to war, what the point was of going to war or what were they trying to achieve, the greater likelihood is they would say that they went to war to preserve democracy. What is more core to a democracy than a legitimate vote, not a suppressed vote but a legitimate vote? It strikes me as highly ironic that we are having a debate about cutbacks to Veterans Affairs in the context of, arguably, the biggest vote fraud scandal in our nation's history.

If I were a veteran, I would be asking myself how my sacrifice contributed to the preservation of our democracy and therefore the preservation of our vote. A vote is a genuine expression on the part of a citizen to elect his or her representatives. We all know what a sham vote. We saw that happen in Russia this past weekend, where no impartial or fair-minded observer would ever say that vote was a genuine expression of the citizens of Russia.

I do not want to get too high-minded, but the suppression of a vote by misdirection is a fraud perpetrated in the name of Elections Canada. I was very pleased to hear over the course of the weekend senior Conservative officials saying that they were as upset as anybody and that they wanted to get to the bottom of it as much as anybody. I would like, as would all members of the House, to take those words at face value. It is kind of hard to square that with the way in which Elections Canada is constantly marginalized, why its own budget is being reduced and its resources being cut back.

At this point, 31,000 people have filed complaints with Elections Canada. We can only imagine that is the tip of the iceberg because there are literally thousands of Canadians who have either forgotten or did not make note of these calls on election night.

We are now debating a motion on veterans, whose sole purpose of putting themselves in harm's way was to preserve our way of life, our democracy and, central to that, the vote.

Let me share an anecdote. I am sure that your office, Mr. Speaker, as have many other MPs' offices, has been inundated with emails, telephone calls and various other communications from people saying that they now remember getting telephone calls and thinking it was a little strange at the time. In fact, there was—

● (1825)

Mr. Robert Chisholm: At least say the word “veteran” once in a while.

Hon. John McKay: Thanks for that assistance. Indeed, I am sure veterans have said that they, too, received telephone calls on election night. When they received these calls, they obviously did not take note.

The point is that these calls were received. One woman told me that she and her husband had already voted and after supper received a call from so-called Elections Canada—

Mr. Garry Breitzkreuz: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I really think it is a stretch that the speech somehow relates to the topic we are debating today. By his smile, I think the member recognizes the fact that this is not relevant to our debate.

Mr. James Lunney: Mr. Speaker, I rise on the same point of order. We are debating veterans services today and I think the member knows his remarks are not relevant to the discussion we are having. I would ask the Speaker to call him to order and that his remarks be relevant to the debate.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Members will know that it is important to ensure their comments remain pertinent to the question before the House. At the same time, members are given an abundance of freedom to express their points with the view that they will eventually become pertinent to the question that is in front of the House. I am sure the member was coming around to how his comments would be relevant to the motion.

The hon. member for Scarborough—Guildwood.

Hon. John McKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for that caution, but I would point out that had my hon. colleagues, who chose to intervene, listened to what I was saying, they would have realized the vote that we as citizens have is because veterans paid the sacrifice for that. Any interference with that vote is an interference with our democracy and nothing could be more offensive than the suppression of that vote by any means.

I want to finish with the anecdote, which seemed to get hon. members upset, but I am about to get them a little more upset because this woman did describe the situation where she had voted. She and her husband came home, received a so-called Elections Canada call and paid no attention to it whatsoever. Nine months later, with all of the publicity that has recently been generated, she realized that she too was almost a victim. Then she contacted my office, as I am sure other members have also been contacted. She was very irate.

I exchanged correspondence with her and asked whether I could use her story. She initially said “yes” and then 24 hours later, she said “no”. The reason was that her heritage was from a Soviet country and this was the kind of stuff that went on in the country from which she originated. She was very concerned that somehow this information would be used against her.

We can all say that is just paranoia, and let us hope it is, but on the other hand, it is from these kinds of small things that if we do not protect democracy, it will in some manner or another disappear. Our veterans have made the strongest sacrifice they can possibly make in order to protect that vote, that democracy and that way of life.

I have the great honour to be the Liberal Party's defence critic and, as such, I have had quite a number of opportunities to meet senior military officials, junior officers and enlisted people in a whole variety of settings. This summer I was on a frigate and spent some time with officers and the enlisted on the frigate. Indeed, I have even ridden on a helicopter at CFB Greenwood, as the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore well knows. I took that flight from CFB Greenwood, not from a fishing camp. I have ridden on search and rescue planes, the Aurora, the Hercules, at Camp Wainwright, RMC and a variety of other settings at formal and informal events.

Adjournment Proceedings

Without doubt, we are served by some of the finest people I have ever had the honour to know. No military is without its flaws, but the personnel I have had the honour to meet is truly exceptional.

It is regrettable that I have to move to the end of my speech because there are a number of points I wanted to raise even from today's correspondence, one of which was from Michel Estey, a retired sergeant, who said, “The New Veterans Charter, seriously, is a bureaucratic nightmare, laden with red-tape and hoops, I genuinely feel sorry for my brother and sisters in arms who are being nicked and dined under this new charter...[the Minister], [the Prime Minister], VA doesn't need cuts, it needs restructuring, use priority hiring to hire your injured and released Vets”.

I apologize that I was not able to get to the meat of the speech.

● (1830)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): It being 6:35 p.m., pursuant to an order made earlier today, all questions necessary to dispose of the opposition motion are deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred until Tuesday, March 6 at the expiry of the time provided for government orders.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

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

● (1835)

[*English*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I am rising today to pursue a question that I put to the Minister of the Environment in November of last year and it has only now come forward for adjournment proceedings. I am grateful for the opportunity to pursue the matter that I raised at the time, although some time has passed.

The matter relates to the composition of government delegations to international conferences, in particular to the 17th conference of the Parties that took place in Durban, South Africa at the close of 2011 under the framework convention on climate change. Members may recall that there was a change in government policy and a decision was made to exclude members of the opposition from the delegation that took part in COP 17 in Durban.

Given the passage of time, I am hoping that I will be able to determine from the parliamentary secretary what the position of the government will be in relation to the composition of the delegation to COP 18 when it occurs in Doha. I am particularly interested to know whether, at this point, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment can confirm whether Canada plans to participate in COP 18 which will also include negotiations relating to the Kyoto protocol.

Adjournment Proceedings

The reason for this question will be obvious to those who have been attentive to this issue. On return from Durban, the hon. Minister of the Environment announced that Canada had no intention of participating in the second phase of Kyoto and that we also intended to legally withdraw.

There has not been sufficient attention to the fact that when the Minister of the Environment made this announcement he did not legally withdraw Canada from Kyoto. That is not possible. In one fell swoop, so he sent a letter to the UN secretariat on climate change. The effect of that letter was to give a one year notice of Canada's intent to withdraw. This creates an interesting dynamic for the Privy Council in that the legal withdrawal from Kyoto will not take place until after the conclusion of COP 18 which is taking place in Qatar in the city of Doha.

I want to explore a couple of future prospects that I am hoping the government has considered. Will we participate in negotiations relating to the second phase of the Kyoto protocol, as we did in Durban, undermining the progress that other nations intend to make in that second commitment period? Will we stay home from Doha? If we attend Doha at COP 18, will we return to the practice of decades, not merely of a previous Liberal government or a previous majority government or a previous minority government, but going back in time, at least as far as the government under former Prime Minister Trudeau, certainly the practice of former Prime Minister Mulroney and so on through the decades, until we find ourselves in a situation where opposition members for the first time were excluded by the current government?

Will Canada be participating in COP 18? Will members of opposition parties be included? If we participate in COP 18, will we have the effrontery to participate in negotiations under the Kyoto protocol when we have already signalled our legal intention to withdraw?

• (1840)

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am glad to be able to speak to my colleague opposite's questions this evening, because there are a lot of mistruths in her statement.

First, I will address her question with regard to the composition of the delegation leading into Durban. Our government has been quite clear in our approach to priorities, that we have a strong mandate to ensure that our economy continues to thrive and that we see job growth in this country. From that, I think in the lead-up to Durban, we felt it was very important for our government to speak with one voice at Durban, because of the varying positions that would be in violation of, or in a dichotomy with, that initial principle.

When we look at the NDP, they actually have worked against the interest of the country by going to the United States and lobbying against our jobs in the energy sector. The Liberals have a track record of complete inaction when it comes to climate change. The former Liberal government signed on to Kyoto with no plan to implement it. We also saw greenhouse gas emissions rise under its tenure. My colleague opposite's party has been varied in its policy stance on how to approach environmental stewardship while balancing the need for economic growth.

By contrast our government has been very clear. We have said that we need to ensure that we take real action with regard to greenhouse gas emission reduction, but we also need to do that in a pragmatic way to ensure that our economy retains a competitive advantage.

That said, we felt it was very important to have our country speak with one united voice at Durban, including a recognition of the fact that we are taking strong action here at home domestically. We are leaders. The International Institute for Sustainable Development said in a recent report that our government's policy is a good start. We are making actual progress with our sector by sector regulatory approach. We have seen regulations come into place in the transportation sector. We are now looking at the coal-fired sector. We have plans for other sector reductions and regulations as well.

Thus, number one, we have had a strong domestic approach.

Number two, our government has said that the Kyoto protocol is not something we should just be standing still on with regard to an international approach to greenhouse gas emission reductions. We need to see all major emitters come to the table.

My colleague opposite has to acknowledge that the Kyoto protocol now includes less than 20% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions at present. Therefore, we need a new agreement. We need to have all of these countries come to the table and sign on to an agreement with binding targets.

We did not feel that the opposition parties had that stance. As such, because we are proud of the approach we are taking and because we want to see real action, our government was proud to go to Durban and take that message forward.

With regard to some of the other questions the member asked, we do have a very clear position. We have been very transparent. We withdrew from the Kyoto protocol because it does not work. The international community needs a new agreement to see real reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

Therefore, we will continue on the good work that was started in Copenhagen and continued in Cancun and in Durban this year toward that new agreement, but we will also continue with our pragmatic, balanced action-focused approach, a sector by sector regulatory approach to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, while ensuring that our economy is not competitively disadvantaged while we do that.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, I have to confess that although I have great personal regard for the hon. parliamentary secretary, I am disappointed that she did not answer any of the questions I put forward in my initial statement.

Certainly there were no mistruths, as she characterized them, in my statement. We still do not know from her statement if Canada plans to go to Doha, and what the composition of the delegation will be.

Adjournment Proceedings

I do need to correct a few things she said. The idea that a delegation of the Canadian government can only include members of Parliament who agree with the government position is absurd. In the past I can recall that the Liberal government took along a terrific guy, Bob Mills, a former member of Parliament for both the Reform and Conservative parties. Bob did not happen to agree with the Liberal Party policies, but he was part of government delegations because in international fora we are a country. We are international and not just one party.

The Liberal climate plans were late, but they were good. They were cancelled by the Conservatives. We do need to have more countries in Kyoto, and the way to do that is to participate in the second phase of Kyoto.

● (1845)

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, to address my colleague's comments, first of all, it is important to speak with one voice. That is not necessarily one party's voice, but it is one unified voice on something as important as climate change.

Our government feels quite strongly that the approach we are taking to global greenhouse gas reductions is an action-focused one. It is one from which we will see real results over the next few years. I certainly hope that we can work together to refine that approach, because I also have regard for the hon. member.

That said, it is important to note the following about the Kyoto protocol as it stands right now. The hon. member just stated that if we signed onto it or signed on for a second commitment period, we would see action. We would not. Major emitting countries do not have binding targets under this agreement.

Contrary to what the hon. member says, we do have as a country the legal right to withdraw from this, and we also have an obligation as a country to ensure that we have an agreement where all major emitters come to the table to see real action.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Before we proceed to the next question, I just remind hon. members that during adjournment proceedings members are invited to sit wherever in the chamber they wish to be, in close proximity perhaps to the parliamentary secretary or minister whom they may be questioning.

The hon. member for Trinity—Spadina.

AIRLINE SAFETY

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, without a doubt, air travel is an important means of travel for Canadians to bridge the vast distances in our country and to connect us to the rest of the world. The rising number of passengers shows the central role that aviation plays in connecting family members and business partners alike. In rural areas, air services provide crucial links to isolated communities. Airports are there to enable transport and mobility, for example, for people to see doctors or access jobs. A number of strategically located airports also increasingly serve as hubs for intercontinental connections.

Sadly enough, the commercial importance of air travel for Canadian citizens and companies is not reflected in the policies of the Conservative government. Like their Liberal predecessors, the Conservatives have been dragging their feet in implementing vital safety measures and in ensuring that air carriers are properly certified

and monitored in their contributions in order to make plane travel safe.

Let me give three examples. First, the Canadian Federal Pilots Association has urged Transport Canada to hire more inspectors to check more aircraft for their airworthiness. What did the ministry do? It actually reduced those inspectors by 10%.

The Auditor General, in her 2008 report, pointed out severe flaws in the way deregulated air safety was being handled and that it was being offloaded to the air carriers under the name of the safety management system.

Over the years, the Transport Safety Board has heavily criticized Transport Canada, and I will give the House one concrete example of that. The terrain awareness and warning system has been recommended since 1995. Unfortunately, for 13 years the Liberals did nothing and for six years three Conservative cabinet ministers also have not done much.

We have seen a study showing that terrain warning systems prevents close to 100% of accidents. The U.S. and the EU required all planes to have these warning systems years ago, and since 1997, 35 planes have been flown into the ground, leading to the death of 100 people and 46 serious injuries. Many of these lives could have been saved.

To give another example, in 1998 the U.S. made installation of this system mandatory. In 2003, the International Civil Aviation Organization recommended that all its members do the right thing. Unfortunately, even though the current government made an announcement recently, it is asking for new rules to give airlines five full years to implement the change requiring them to have TAWS in their planes.

My question is what will happen in the five years before these regulations are enforced? I ask because we know that with the terrain awareness warning system, lives can be saved. After all these years of waiting, it should be implemented immediately.

● (1850)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, let me begin by pointing out that the government, through Transport Canada, NAV Canada, and the system of airports large and small, national airports and regional airports, has collaborated to instill the highest safety standards and the best methods of protecting passenger, crew and pilot safety of any country in the world. We continue to build upon that success throughout the operation of our program.

The member's original question, from which this intervention today emanates, was regarding the fleet that we operate as Transport Canada. Our fleet is maintained by the department and its maintenance engineers. It is operated by the department's inspectors, who provide safety oversight for the civilian aviation industry in Canada.

Adjournment Proceedings

Transport Canada has a robust program in place to verify the safety of air transport companies. We dedicate more than 80% of civil aviation safety resources to oversight activities like inspections. Our surveillance procedures include planned and unplanned inspections to verify compliance with our aviation regulations. These inspections involve on-site interviews with staff in order to review the company's safety practices.

The reason pilot inspectors use the Transport Canada fleet is to conduct inspections in the following two ways. First, this allows transportation support for oversight activities to occur in certain locations, for example the Arctic, where there is no direct commercial route or daily service. Without the existing aircraft within our fleet, this would result in extended travel times, which would be an inefficient use of resources.

Second, the government has contractual agreements with its pilot inspector union to maintain its current pilots' operating hours. Inspectors are required to maintain their qualifications, which in the case of pilots, means maintaining their pilot licence and instrument rating. Flying these aircraft also provides departmental inspectors with exposure to the national civil aviation transportation system. This is important. If someone wants to be an inspector of the system, he or she should know how it works and have some practical, hands-on experience with its operation. Additionally, the aircraft fleet may be used under certain circumstances to carry government officials.

The hon. member's original question criticized the expenditure on this fleet. It should be pointed out that following an expenditure review, Transport Canada is reducing the aircraft fleet from 42 to 27 aircraft. In the process it will save millions of dollars in both capital and operating costs. This is an example of how, while we continue to believe in the necessity to have a Transport Canada air fleet, we also work to reduce the burden that that fleet imposes on the Canadian taxpayers who fund it.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Mr. Speaker, we have no problem with having inspections. In fact, we have been asking for more inspections. We have been asking for the hiring of more pilots. The Canadian Federal Pilots Association has documented a big cut in inspections. It is calling for the hiring of more pilots. We note that in this

supplementary budget, aviation safety has been cut by \$17 million, which is a cut of 7%.

My question to the parliamentary secretary is how many pilots right now are hired to conduct inspections as compared to say, five or ten years ago? I have been told there has been a dramatic decrease. The pilots association is worried that, because it does not have trained staff to do inspections, the safety management system cannot be implemented successfully.

• (1855)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, the reality is that our job here as parliamentarians and as a government is to deliver the services that people need, in this case civil aviation security, in the most cost effective manner possible. That means from time to time we will find areas where we can deliver the same service but at a lower cost. We do so by eliminating excessive administration, duplication and by driving efficiencies. That is also the case within the area of civil aviation, within the area of security at our airports and in the sky.

We ensure that we deliver the service first and then, second, we find how to deliver that service in the most efficient manner possible. The measure of our achievement is not how much money we spend but whether we keep the Canadian people and international travellers safe when they use the system.

The two goals of our government are security first and then efficiency and we will continue to work within the confines of those goals. So far, I am happy to report to the House, we have been very successful.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Scarborough—Guildwood is not present to raise the matter for which adjournment notice has been given. Accordingly, the notice is deemed withdrawn.

[*Translation*]

The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:57 p.m.)

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