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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, March 5, 2009

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, March 5, 2009

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

•(1000)
[English]

NATIONAL CEMETERY OF CANADA ACT

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of the Environment, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-17, An Act to recognize Beechwood Cemetery as the national cemetery of Canada.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to introduce a bill entitled, “An Act to recognize Beechwood Cemetery as the national cemetery of Canada”, also known as the National Cemetery of Canada Act. It is a historic piece of legislation for our country.

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

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(a)(v), I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the eighth report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs regarding matters related to webcasting of the House and its committees.

If the House gives its consent, I intend to move concurrence in this report later today.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fourth report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development entitled, “Report on the Baha'i Community in Iran”.

* * *

PREVENTION OF TORTURE ACT

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-334, An Act prohibiting the commission, abetting or exploitation of torture by Canadian officials

and ensuring freedom from torture for all Canadians at home and abroad and making consequential amendments to other Acts.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to reintroduce this important piece of legislation which unfortunately, although it came very close, did not make it to a vote in the last Parliament before the election was called.

I appreciate the help and support of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association which gave me a great deal of help in drafting the bill.

The bill is a comprehensive attempt to address the issue of torture. It makes it a criminal offence to use information known to be obtained using torture. It stops any officials from Canada from transferring prisoners into the hands of those who are suspected or known to use torture. It creates a government watch list of countries that are known to engage in torture. It prevents the use of national security provisions as a measure to withhold information about torture, which happened for months during the Afghan detainees scandal last year.

I urge all members of the House to join together to reject torture in all its forms and to support this very important bill.

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

* * *

•(1005)

CANADA LABOUR CODE

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-335, An Act to amend the Canada Labour Code (illness or injury).

He said: Mr. Speaker, this bill will extend the allowable period of absence for illness and ensure that a worker cannot be dismissed, suspended, laid off, demoted or disciplined by an employer if the worker misses work due to serious illness for a period of up to 52 weeks. I believe this bill is fair and will protect seriously ill workers while ensuring that businesses remain viable.

This bill, if passed, will make a tremendous difference in the lives of many families right across Canada. I hope it receives the support of all the members.

Routine Proceedings

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

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the House gives it consent, I move that the eighth report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs presented to the House earlier this day be concurred in. This report concerns a change to the Speaker's permission regarding the reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.
(Motion agreed to)

* * *

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I move:

That, notwithstanding the Standing Orders or usual practices of the House, at the conclusion of today's debate on the opposition motion in the name of the member for Hamilton Mountain, all questions necessary to dispose of this motion be deemed put, a recorded division deemed requested and deferred to the end of government orders on Tuesday, March 10, 2009.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.
(Motion agreed to)

* * *

PETITIONS

INCOME TRUSTS

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present what I believe is the 100th petition presented in the House in the last two Parliaments on the subject matter of the income trust broken promise. It comes to me from Mr. Robert Cherry in my riding of Mississauga South. Of course, this petition is being presented pursuant to Standing Order 36 and it is certified by the clerk of petitions.

Mr. Cherry and the other petitioners remember the Prime Minister's commitment to accountability when the Prime Minister said, "The greatest fraud is a promise not kept". The petitioners want to remind the Prime Minister that he promised never to tax income trusts, that he recklessly broke that promise, and that he imposed a 31.5% punitive tax which permanently wiped out \$25 billion of the hard-earned retirement savings of over two million Canadians, particularly seniors.

The petitioners call upon the Conservative minority government to admit that the decision to tax income trusts was based on flawed methodology and incorrect assumptions, as was demonstrated in the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance, to apologize to

those who were unfairly harmed by this broken promise, and to repeal the 31.5% tax on income trusts.

Members will recall that the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance indicated that this was not a problem because the markets have recovered. I wonder what they would say today.

• (1010)

INCOME TAX ACT

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present two more petitions, both of which were circulated by members and supporters of the building trades. The petitioners come from all over Ontario, but many of them are from my riding of Hamilton Mountain.

Building trades across the country have lobbied successive governments for over 30 years to achieve some basic fairness for their members. They want tradespeople and indentured apprentices to be able to deduct travel and accommodation expenses from their taxable incomes so that they can secure and maintain employment at construction sites that are more than 80 kilometres from their homes.

It makes no sense, especially during this economic crisis, for tradespeople to be out of work in one area of the country while another region suffers from temporary shortages of skilled tradespeople simply because the cost of travelling is too high. To that end, they have gathered hundreds of signatures in support of my bill, which would allow for precisely the kinds of deductions their members have been asking for.

I am pleased to table these petitions on their behalf and share their disappointment that this item was not addressed in the last federal budget.

ADULT TELEVISION CHANNEL

Mr. Randy Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36, I am pleased to present a petition from my constituents, largely those from the district of Mission in British Columbia. They draw the attention of the House of Commons to the fact that the CRTC has approved another Canadian pay television pornographic channel called Northern Peaks, which they believe will lead to the creation of a pornography industry in Canada.

They point out that pornography is not a victimless activity. It is addictive, leads to changes in behaviour and causes harmful acts that hurt and undermine women, children and society as a whole. Therefore, they call upon Parliament to review the approval of this type of channel and the approval policies of the CRTC.

* * *

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.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION — EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP) moved:

That, in the opinion of this House, the government must address the alarming growth in the number of unemployed Canadians and the increasing number of Employment Insurance claimants; confirm its commitment to a social safety net to help regular Canadians through tough times and bring forward reforms to Employment Insurance rules to expand eligibility and improve benefits, including:

- (a) eliminate the two-week waiting period;
- (b) reduce the qualifying period to a minimum of 360 hours of work, regardless of the regional rate of unemployment;
- (c) allow self-employed workers to participate in the plan;
- (d) raise the rate of benefits to 60% and base benefits on the best 12 weeks in the qualifying period; and
- (e) encourage training and re-training.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time this morning with the member for Acadie—Bathurst.

Let me at the outset thank the Canadian Labour Congress and its affiliated unions for being tireless champions of working people in this country and for making EI reform a cornerstone of its campaign to ensure that the involuntarily unemployed will not be forgotten in the new investments that are to drive our economic recovery.

The motion that is before us today is a testament to its dedication and determination. I am proud to table it in this House on behalf of all of the hard-working Canadians who now, more than ever, need the government's support.

I do not think there is anyone in this House anymore who would not acknowledge that our economy is in one of the worst recessions since the 1930s, but since we are also not yet prepared to use the D word, depression, to describe the current state of the Canadian economy, perhaps we could all just agree that we are in the great recession.

As leaders throughout the G20 have acknowledged, at times like these, history teaches us that governments have a critical role to play in protecting the jobs of today, creating the jobs of tomorrow, and helping the innocent victims of this economic crisis. Unfortunately, the Conservative government in this country has only turned its mind to part of that challenge.

New Democrats have detailed the shortcomings of its budget in great detail and I do not have the luxury of time to repeat all of those arguments here. Suffice it to say that neither the government nor its Liberal allies, who supported the budget, believe that the economy is designed to create better lives for all. Rather, they believe that the economy is designed to create higher profits for the few.

If that is the premise that underlies their plan to bring Canada back to economic health, then it should come as no surprise that the plan would be all but silent on helping the innocent victims of corporate restructurings, plant closures and layoffs.

It speaks to an ideological predisposition to view it as a moral hazard to provide too much assistance to unemployed workers. That is why the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development is

Business of Supply

on the record stating, “We do not want to make it lucrative for them to stay home and get paid for it—”. This is from the minister in charge of EI. It is absolutely shameful.

Darcy Rezak, managing director of the Vancouver Board of Trade, expressed the same sentiment about EI's purported erosion of Canadians' work ethic even more bluntly:

Improved insurance always carries with it a moral hazard. We could see more unemployment because the richer benefits would make some people choose to stay on EI instead of moving to where work is available or taking lower paying jobs.

That may be the logic of the right, but it is completely out of touch with reality. I would invite members of the government, and indeed of the Liberal Party, all of whom supported the federal budget, to come to my hometown of Hamilton.

This week, 1,500 additional workers lost their jobs at U.S. Steel. It made the national news, but sadly, that is just the tip of the iceberg. There were earlier layoffs at U.S. Steel and there were layoffs at National Steel Car, Tinnerman, Stelwire, MultiServ, Samuel-Kent, Tamarack Lumber, Triple M Metal, Global GIX Canada, Decor, Samuel Plate Sales, North American Tillage Tools, Georgia-Pacific and HD Industries.

These are just the layoffs since April of last year and only in plants organized by the United Steelworkers. They do not include the jobs lost in nursing, the auto sector, small manufacturing, the service industry, health care, construction, or any of the hundreds of non-unionized workplaces that make up our complex local economy.

Across the nation, we lost 129,000 jobs in January of this year alone, but these newly unemployed workers in Hamilton and right across the country are not mere statistics. They are the innocent victims of decisions made elsewhere. They are family members. They are consumers who support our small businesses. They are property taxpayers who support our municipalities and they are income taxpayers who support our schools and health care system. They deserve the attention and support of the government.

It is not just New Democrats who are saying that. Economists of all stripes agree that we must pay attention to the victims of this recession. They all agree that a crucial component of charting the road to economic recovery is to provide support to those who have lost jobs through no fault of their own.

In fact, they eloquently make the case that employment insurance is a key macroeconomy automatic stabilizer. EI benefits are spent in local communities and provide the economic stimulus that stabilizes hard-hit communities. EI benefits stabilize individual and family incomes, something which of course is also critically important for women's equality, and EI benefits provide the much needed temporary income support for active job searching or training.

Business of Supply

●(1015)

It is for all of these reasons that the motion before us today is so critically important. While we criticize the government for not having included meaningful employment insurance reform in its budget, we in the NDP firmly believe that in order to be an effective force in this House we cannot just oppose, but we must propose as well.

The proposition before the House today invites all members of Parliament to recognize that the budget further victimized the already innocent victims of this recession by ignoring their need for support and invites us to correct that wrong now by adopting comprehensive EI reform.

The motion itself is very straightforward. It simply seeks to take some concrete steps in expanding EI eligibility and improving benefits so that we can stop the fraying of Canada's social safety net.

First, the motion calls for the elimination of the two week waiting period. The Prime Minister disgraced himself by suggesting that workers should consider this the deductible on their insurance. The Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development then added insult to injury by suggesting that the government needed those two weeks to ensure that laid-off workers were not trying to cheat the system.

We are talking about a benefit that is paid to the involuntarily unemployed. Their rent and mortgage payments cannot wait two weeks. The empty stomachs of their children cannot wait two weeks and their benefits should not have to wait either.

The second thing the motion calls for is a reduction and standardization of the hours of qualification to 360 hours of work. Compared to previous recessions, EI today will leave many in the cold. As of October last year, less than half of the unemployed, 43% to be exact, qualified for EI benefits. Only 32% in Ontario and 35% in B.C. Only 40% of men collect and an even lower 32% of women get any support from EI.

While it is true that some unemployed will always be ineligible for EI, perhaps because they are new entrants to the workforce, the main reason for these numbers is the grid. EI operates under an inordinately complex system of rules that bases eligibility and the duration of benefits on the local unemployment rate. Currently, the range is anywhere from 420 to 910 hours. That system is neither equitable nor accessible and it is high time that Canadians from coast to coast to coast were treated equally.

Third, the motion calls for self-employed workers to be allowed to participate in the plan. That part of the motion is plainly self-explanatory so I will not spend a lot of time on it here. Suffice it to say that it would make a profoundly positive difference for thousands of Canadians and especially women who operate the small businesses that we count on to drive our economy in good times, but they are now being caught up in a tsunami of job losses that is cascading across our country.

The fourth part of the motion calls for an increase in the weekly benefits that unemployed workers would receive. Specifically, it calls for the benefits to be based on the best 12 weeks of earnings before a layoff with the replacement rate of 60% of insured earnings.

By adopting the 12 week criteria, we can eliminate the benefit reductions that often result from shorter hours before layoffs. By raising the benefit levels to 60%, we may begin to catch up in real dollars to the benefit levels that were being paid before the then Liberal government tinkered with EI in the 1990s. The current maximum rate of \$447 per week has been heavily eroded by inflation. The equivalent in 1996 would have been \$604. If we want EI to be a stabilizer in this recession, it is time to adjust the rates.

Finally, our motion speaks to the need for training and retraining. Contrary to the minister's assertion, EI is not so lucrative as to make workers want to stay at home. Quite the opposite, they do not want to stay at home, they want to work so they can save their home. But our economy is in transition and we must provide and support the training opportunities that will allow workers to participate fully in the jobs of the new economy when this recession is over.

I know that the set of proposals is not free of costs, but it is an effective form of economic stimulus and it is the most effective way to help the victims of this economic crisis. Failure to act now will simply download the costs to municipalities and ultimately to property taxpayers, a trend we are already seeing in Hamilton as workers ineligible for EI turn to social assistance to support their families.

For years, both Liberals and Conservatives have misused the then surpluses of the EI fund dedicating them to debt and deficit reduction. Last year's budget legalized that theft, but that does not make it moral.

●(1020)

The money was contributed by workers and employers to provide support during economic rainy days. Well, it is raining. In fact, the monsoon season has arrived. We have a moral obligation to restore the integrity of the Employment Insurance Act. I am counting on all members to join with us in the NDP today and support this motion on behalf of Canadian workers.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was listening to the member who indicated that the NDP cannot just oppose. As we all know, the budget implementation bill contains a number of provisions regarding EI, like an extra five weeks of EI benefits helping some 400,000 Canadians.

Did the member vote against the budget implementation bill? How can she say she is concerned when part of it is the extension of the work sharing program from 38 to 52 weeks worth \$200 million. There is \$500 million for long-tenured workers over two years giving up to 10,000 long-tenured workers additional time, and there is training for those who do not even qualify for EI.

Business of Supply

How can the member suggest that she cares when she opposes a variety of programs that surely must be helpful in a time like this, in a global economic—

• (1025)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Hamilton Mountain.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I cannot believe I am being lectured by a member on the opposite side about employment insurance.

Yes, we welcome the additional five weeks of support, but my goodness, five weeks of additional support is not going to be enough help. Moreover, the government limited those extra five weeks to a two year window. Employment insurance has been entirely paid for by workers and employers in this country. It is not the government's money to play with.

However, I guess it is now because in last year's budget the government legalized the theft of the EI surplus, \$54 billion worth. We need to increase the number of people who are eligible for EI. We had that opportunity in the budget. The government did not take advantage of that and it is time to do the right thing now.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague for bringing forward this motion today. Much of what she said I agree with.

One thing that is not in the motion that is causing a great deal of concern for Canadians is how long they have to wait to get their EI cheques.

Before Christmas I sent a letter to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development indicating that I was hearing not only from people in my riding but across the country that the standard waiting time had gone from 28 days to something more like 40 days, and it may have gone beyond that. Since that time I have had emails from across the country from people who have given us stories of how long they have had to wait for their employment benefits cheque.

Therefore, not only should we look at doing something on the two week waiting period but perhaps we should be doing something to ensure timely access. The member is correct. EI is a great form of stimulus in a sad way because the people who get it have to spend it. However, they need to get it right away and I wonder if the member has a comment on that.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I certainly agree with the sentiment that the processing time for people to be able to access their EI benefits is unbelievably long. People who have just lost their jobs need access to that money now. Nothing in my constituency office is creating more of a panic frankly among constituents than their desire to get access to benefits in a timely way.

However, I have to say to the member first of all that this does not require a legislative change. It requires proper resourcing by the ministry to be able to ensure that EI claimants get access to the money they deserve. Moreover, this is not a new problem. In the recessions in the eighties, when that member's party was in the government, the same delays were happening. Workers were equally having to wait for benefits. It is a systemic problem.

I would agree with the member that it is something we desperately need to address on behalf of working families in our communities, but it is not something that requires legislative change. For that reason, it is not part of this motion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to congratulate our NDP colleague for moving this motion this morning. We obviously cannot fit everything into such a motion. I understand our Liberal colleague, but sometimes wanting to have it all makes us lose sight of the basic issue. For now, the basic issue is there.

Based on my colleague's research and observations, and those of her party, would she agree that eliminating the waiting period, for example, would not cost very much since we are not increasing the number of benefit weeks, but would simply speed up the payout of benefits, which would mean that people receive benefits more quickly? Would she agree with that?

[*English*]

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I agree with the member. The bottom line is that we need to get money into the hands of those who are involuntarily unemployed. We also need to remember that employment insurance is the best poverty prevention program in the country during economic hard times.

We are in those economic hard times now and we all have a moral obligation to ensure we help those who are unwitting victims of this economic recession.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Before I resume debate, I would like to remind members how the question and answer period works in this place. When there is a 10 minute speech, it is followed by 5 minutes of questions and answers. A questioner will have about a minute and the responder will have about a minute. That way we will move through it.

I am reluctant to cut people off but if they continue to talk and ignore the Chair, I will be forced to do so. There seems to be a lot of interest in this topic today and I think there will be a lot of questions, so I encourage everyone to work with the Chair.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst.

• (1030)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would first like to thank the member for Hamilton Mountain for having moved this employment insurance motion. Secondly, I would like to thank my political party, the NDP, and its leader for having made employment insurance today's priority.

Everyone is focused on the economic crisis and how we can give money to employers so that they can maintain jobs. We also want employees to have the opportunity to keep their jobs. At the same time, others do not have that opportunity; they will not be lucky enough to keep their jobs.

Business of Supply

I will not repeat everything that my colleague from Hamilton Mountain said in her motion because I agree with all of her statements.

As for eliminating the two week waiting period, my colleague from the Bloc Québécois mentioned that it would simply be enough to move the last two weeks of benefits to the start of the benefit period.

The government is bragging about making big changes to employment insurance in this budget by adding five weeks at the end of the benefit period. The Conservatives are bragging about this and asking us, the NDP members, who we are to lecture them and tell them this was not a good idea, when we voted against their bill and against the budget. Well, we voted against their budget because it was not a good budget. Their budget did not go far enough.

The minister herself has said that the two week waiting period is not two weeks of waiting, but two weeks of punishment, because claimants are not paid during that time. Claimants can wait 28 days, 40 days, 50 days, even 60 days. And the Conservatives have done nothing to help workers in this regard, absolutely nothing. Just the opposite.

For example, there are rumours going around my riding this week that 15 workers are going to be moved from Bathurst to Moncton. These are people who process employment insurance claims and make sure people can receive EI. They are going to be sent away from Bathurst to take up some jobs for which they are unqualified, while in Moncton, new people who know nothing about the process are going to be trained.

This week, the minister boasted and said she wanted to improve the employment insurance system. The idea behind paying people for the two week waiting period is not to allow them to stay home, it is to make sure that once they have lost their jobs and are no longer receiving cheques from their employer, they can feed their families and pay their electricity bills, especially in winter, when it is cold like it is today and electricity bills run \$500 a month.

People who have been working and earning \$1,500 a week receive EI benefits calculated at the rate of 55%. I do not know whether people are aware of this. I want to tell the people who are lucky enough never to have received employment insurance that it pays only 55% of \$750. So people used to earning \$1,500 a week end up with \$430 or \$450 a week.

Yet the minister has the nerve to insult workers by saying that if she paid them for the two week waiting period, they would be tempted to sit at home. And the Conservatives wonder why we voted against their budget. We voted against the budget because it is not good.

As for the additional five weeks of benefits at the end of the benefit period, the government says it wants these people to find a job and go to work. They will not be able to take advantage of those five weeks if they are lucky enough to find work. Why not help them when they are struggling?

Our motion refers to 360 hours. Only 32% of Canadian women qualify for employment insurance, and only 38% of Canadian men qualify. We are in an economic crisis. We are all worried about the

people who lose their jobs, because when they become unemployed, they do not even qualify for employment insurance, even though they paid for the system themselves.

The Liberals can laugh at the other end of the House, but they are the ones who voted against this, who made the changes to employment insurance and who allowed \$57 billion to be stolen from the employment insurance fund.

●(1035)

The Conservatives can laugh on their side of the House. They are the ones who sanctioned the theft from the EI fund on the backs of unemployed workers, on the backs of families and on the backs of those most vulnerable. They now stand here and brag that they can balance the budget, and eliminate the deficit—on the backs of the poor, the unemployed workers and people who work in factories, in the forestry and manufacturing sectors and the auto industry in Ontario.

The president of the Canadian Labour Congress—and I would just like to congratulate the CLC and thank it for everything it is doing for working men and women—asked for a meeting with the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, but so far she has refused. She is refusing to meet with the president—the representative—of Canada's largest union. If the president of General Motors asked for a meeting, would she not take his call? If Alberta oil companies asked for a meeting, would she not take their call? But does she have time to take a call from the man who represents workers? Of course not. Workers are a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings who do not want to work. They should be cut off from employment insurance. They do not deserve to get any money because they are a bunch of slackers. That is shameful, insulting and unacceptable.

On Monday when this comes to a vote in the House of Commons, we will see how many members support the NDP motion, how many people will stand up in this House, how many representatives of the people, of working men and women, of Canadians and Quebeckers, how many of those representatives will agree to use this program, which belongs to the working people, to help those very people.

In June 2005, we raised the 12 best weeks issue. My Liberal colleague stood up earlier to say that we never asked for help for people who wait a long time for their employment insurance benefits. We asked the government to use the 12 best weeks, but the Liberals voted against it. They voted against using workers' 12 best weeks. I remember that; I have a pretty good memory. I remember what they did, and I remember that they did not support workers.

I am thinking of self-employed workers. I am thinking of a woman who is self-employed and who told me that she could never take a sick day or even have a child because if ever she took a day off, she would have to close her company. She would lose her livelihood and there would be nobody to help her. What did the government do for self-employed workers? Nothing at all.

Business of Supply

I will tell you about one of my constituents. Gina Miller, a hair stylist, became pregnant and asked for help because when she stops working there will be no one left and she will no longer have a source of income. She asked for assistance. There were no programs to help her. Today, the Conservatives have the gall to ask why we voted against the budget. It is because, in this time of economic crisis, they did not include anything in the budget to help workers. They boast that the five weeks they added at the end of 45 weeks of benefits will help solve these people's financial problems. It is shameful and they should not be boasting about it.

Whenever we introduced bills in this House, we included all the changes that were necessary. They said it would cost too much and that they could not vote for all these changes. The motions and the bills were discussed, one by one, but they voted against them because they do not believe in the workers. It is like a rabbit with a carrot. They seem to be saying that it is unfortunate if they are made to suffer, but the workers will be the employers' slaves. That is what they want: workers who do what they are told. As for the rest, there is nothing. There is absolutely nothing.

After applying for employment insurance, workers wait 40 days before being called by a representative and finding out whether or not they qualify. Forty days. How do these families survive?

Once again, I wish to thank the New Democratic Party, my party, for tabling in the House of Commons this most important motion especially in these times of economic uncertainty.

An hon. member: Time, time.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I hear someone from another party calling out "Time, time". That is more proof that, like the Conservatives, they are against the workers.

• (1040)

[English]

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest to the rhetoric from the member for Acadie—Bathurst and the member for Hamilton Mountain before him. I want to revisit the issue of the waiting period. I actually have some real questions for him, questions of clarification.

It seems to me that if an individual becomes unemployed during this recession, it is at the micro level for that individual and his or her family. It is not really very much different from the person who became unemployed prior to the recession. They are both feeling the same effects. I do not recall the NDP proposing prior to this economic downturn that the waiting period should be done away with.

Why did members of the NDP not propose it before this if they thought it was such a difficult thing for unemployed people? Are they proposing that this be a permanent measure or is this just a temporary measure?

Second, because the EI program is largely funded by the users of the program, are they in favour of the premiums going up for those who are employed—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, those are two good questions.

Are people in favour of paying more premiums? I have never seen workers rallying in the streets and saying that they were paying too much into EI but I have seen many people rallying in the streets and saying that they were not getting their EI. It is not the \$1.80 per \$100 that makes the difference to the workers.

The member said that the NDP has never put a motion forward in the House about the waiting period. As I said, it is not a waiting period. People do not get paid for the first two weeks. However, the NDP has put forward motions and bills in the House, as has the Bloc Québécois, to get rid of the two week so-called waiting period. I introduced bills in the House in 1999 but they were consistently refused by the Conservatives, the Reform or the Alliance, the whole association.

The member asked if this should be permanent? Yes, it should be permanent. Why should people be penalized when they lose their job. We should just pay them. The member himself said that it was his program, why do—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Questions and comments, the hon. member for Mississauga South.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the debate on EI because it is an issue that has seized this place ever since I came here in 1993. It is very important to keep on top of it.

I would ask a question for information purposes and it concerns offering self-employed workers the right to participate. As we know, they cannot now as there is no opt in, and, of course, they do not pay the premiums or the employer's share.

I know a study was going on and I wonder whether that was suggested, or would the preferred approach be to offer self-employed workers the opportunity to participate at a reduced premium rate but for benefits other than for self-layoff, as it were, that self-employed persons could not benefit by laying themselves off, but maternity and parental leave benefits—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, I am happy the member said that he has been here since 1993 because it was his party, the Liberal Party, that made all the cuts to EI. His party knows how much those cuts hurt. I came here in 1997 because the minister for EI at that time was kicked out by the person who he is speaking about right now. I am not allowed to say who he is but it is the member for Acadie—Bathurst.

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At the same time, let us talk about self-employed people and this motion we put forward. We should sit together as parliamentarians and look at a formula. We could bring people in, which is how laws are made, and listen to what they have to say. After that, we can produce a bill in the House of Commons that will help those people. At this moment, 74% of the jobs in our country are created by small and medium sized businesses run by self-employed people and those are the people who are being left behind.

I do not think anyone would argue today that we should not help those people. When we see those people getting up in the morning, working all day, week after week, servicing people and at the end of the day they fall sick and end up on welfare, it is not acceptable. Don Drummond said that was what would happen if we do not do something about the employment insurance.

•(1045)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Burlington.

Our government recognizes that many Canadians are facing difficult and uncertain times right now. We understand that it affects many of them personally and that they are going through a stressful and difficult time, which is why the government is responding.

Over the last few months, the global economic situation has worsened faster than anyone predicted. While we are in better shape than most countries, Canadian families are feeling the effects of the global recession and they are concerned. They are worried about making ends meet and worried about keeping their jobs. We are listening to them, concerned about them and taking action.

To address the most pressing needs of workers affected by the current economic downturn, our economic action plan is investing \$8.3 billion for the Canada skills and transition strategy. That is a lot of money. Part of our plan is to build on the recognition that the EI program is the first line of defence for many who lose their jobs.

That is why, through our economic action plan, for the next two years we will make available, nationally, the five weeks of extended EI benefits that were previously available through a pilot project only in regions with the highest unemployment rate. We are also increasing the maximum duration of benefits to 50 weeks, up from 45 weeks. Some 400,000 Canadians could benefit from these changes. It is against these measures and this measure that the NDP has voted against time and time again.

This measure will provide financial support for a longer period to unemployed Canadians who otherwise would have exhausted their benefits. This means unemployed workers will have more time to seek employment while still receiving EI.

Before going any further, the opposition would like to make an issue of the lack of accessibility of the employment insurance program. I would like to take a moment to address this issue.

The EI program has important features that automatically respond to changing economic conditions. Currently, the EI program divides the country into 58 regions based on their similar labour market conditions. As unemployment rates increase in a given region, the

number of insured hours required to access the EI program is automatically reduced and the duration of benefits increases. These requirements are adjusted on a monthly basis to reflect the latest regional unemployment rates. That is what it is meant to do. In fact, since October 2009, 19 regions have seen their entrance requirements decrease and their benefit duration increase.

With respect to access to employment insurance rates, according to Statistics Canada, EI access is high. In 2007, over 82% of the unemployed who had paid into the program and lost their job or quit with just cause were eligible to receive benefits.

The opposition likes to quote a number closer to 40% of Canadians being able to access EI benefits. This figure is known as the beneficiary to unemployment ratio or BU ratio. It is not a good measure of EI access. First, this statistic includes many unemployed who have not paid premiums, such as those who have never worked, have not worked in the past year or have been self-employed.

Second, this statistic includes individuals who paid premiums but are ineligible for EI benefits because they have voluntarily quit their jobs or they returned to school.

I would also like to point out that the current entrance requirements do not appear to impede access to the employment insurance program. Only about 7% of EI regular claims have qualified with less than 700 hours, which represents the highest current requirement.

Our government recognizes the challenges faced by those who do not currently qualify for employment insurance benefits. That is why in our economic action plan we committed to a \$500 million strategic training and transition fund over two years to support the particular needs of individuals, including those who do not qualify for EI. This measure could benefit 50,000 people.

Our government also recognizes the need to support longer term training for long-tenured workers, which is why we are extending income support for the duration of the retraining. This will benefit an estimated 40,000 workers. We are also granting earlier access to EI for workers purchasing their own training with their earnings resulting from a layoff, such as severance pay.

We will protect jobs. Just this morning, the minister announced the implementation of a significant expansion to the work sharing program. We are extending the duration of work sharing agreements by 14 weeks to a maximum of 52 weeks. This will enable Canadians to continue working through this slowdown. These changes to the work sharing program are available immediately. It is those measures that the hon. member and others in that party voted against.

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•(1050)

To complement this measure, we are substantially increasing access to work sharing agreements through greater flexibility in the qualifying criteria. This will help Canadians continue working. These enhancements are available starting today. These are concrete actions to help Canadians and their families.

Our government also recognizes that EI maternity and parental benefits play a critical role in supporting Canadian families by providing income replacement for working new parents. That is why in our economic action plan we are committed to establishing an expert panel that will consult Canadians on how to best provide the self-employed with access to EI maternity and parental benefits.

In terms of processing EI claims, which was referenced earlier, our priority is to ensure that workers and their families receive EI benefits as quickly as possible. We have already made significant efforts and investments to process the increasing EI claims. We are hiring additional staff, redistributing workloads across the country and recalling recent retirees. We are also increasing overtime and hours, opening EI call centres on Saturdays and increasing automation of claims processing.

I just heard the hon. member say that some of the extra people being hired are not trained. He tries to blow hot and cold. We are doing all of this, adding more people and resources, but he says that he does not like that. What does he like? We will continue to improve and increase our ability to process claims and help Canadians receive their benefits as quickly as possible.

As part of our economic action plan, we are also increasing supports so that more Canadians can have access to the training and skills they need to land a new job. We are working in partnership with the provinces and territories to help Canadians. We know they have the pulse of the local labour markets and we will help them meet the needs of Canadians by investing \$1 billion over two years through the employment insurance program under existing agreements. This will enable provinces and territories to train workers in hard hit sectors and regions of our economy, helping an additional 100,000 EI eligible Canadians.

It is through measures like this, which we are helping Canadians, that the opposition and NDP vote against. Funds will flow quickly to provinces and territories through the existing agreements.

We are also improving the targeted initiative for older workers program. This initiative provides employment assistance, skills upgrading and work experience for older workers, helping them find new jobs. We are increasing the program's budget with an additional \$60 million over three years and expanding its reach to help more Canadians. Over 250 additional communities will be eligible for this program through this expansion.

It is important that today's debate be put in context. The NDP members like to talk about helping the unemployed but let us take a look at their actual record in this regard.

Yesterday, they voted against helping over 400,000 unemployed Canadians benefit from an additional five weeks of EI benefits. They voted against helping 50,000 unemployed Canadians, who normally do not qualify for EI benefits, to get the training and skills they need

to find a new job and to provide for their families. They voted against 100,000 people getting additional funding and training to find new jobs and put food on the table for their families.

While the NDP members pretend to care about the most vulnerable, they vote against the very measures that are put in place to help them. I find that regrettable.

While the NDP would like to propose solutions that are not costed and unaffordable in the current economic crisis, our government is actually getting the work done following the most extensive prebudget consultations our country has ever seen. We have heard from Canadians and we are delivering for them through our economic action plan.

Our plan will stimulate the economy and help create and maintain jobs for Canadians and their families. It is unfortunate that the NDP and the Bloc refuse to help their constituents in this regard by supporting those measures and the budget, the kinds of things that are needed at this precise time.

Notwithstanding this, we will continue to stand up for Canadians and those workers who find themselves in a difficult challenging time. Together, we will see it through.

•(1055)

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I know the hon. member is engaging in hyperbole because he does not want that practice to go into disuse. However, I want to compliment all those who supported the measures that enhance the EI benefits for those who are, I think reluctantly, in a position where they need to receive them.

Many members may know that I and my colleagues on this side of the House were part of a government that reduced EI premiums for both employers and employees for 10 years in a row. Does anyone know why? It was because we were interested in the concept of job creation and helping to stimulate activity that created jobs.

I would like to ask the parliamentary secretary where the plan is that he referred to that suggests that his government is actually engaged in creating jobs. What is the master plan now that we have given him the authority to spend the billions of dollars of taxpayer money so that we can put people to work? People do not want EI. They want to work. Where is the plan?

Business of Supply

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Mr. Speaker, we have asked the House to fast-track the budget implementation bill so that billions of dollars can go out to the country to create jobs and infrastructure and implement other plans.

We have also frozen EI rates for employers and employees over the next two years so that they will not have that extra cost. That member's government took \$50 billion from the fund and invested it to reduce the overall budget rather than to help those who had paid into the fund. I would ask the member why his government did that at that particular time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we hear anything and everything around here. If there is a plan, it is to ditch workers and the unemployed. That is about it, their so-called plan.

I just heard two statements that are completely unbelievable. Two people said that they will invest, that they agree that good use should be made of employment insurance premiums and so on. Our Liberal friends say that they agree with increasing premiums if it will benefit employment insurance. However, yesterday, in cahoots with the Conservatives, they voted to freeze employment insurance premiums at their lowest rates since 1982.

I am asking the parliamentary secretary to explain his speech and his action yesterday, in partnership with the Liberals, to freeze premiums at their lowest rates since 1982.

[*English*]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Mr. Speaker, we froze the premium rates over two years so that employees and employers would not have to suffer the increase in premiums and so that the savings could stimulate the economy.

I would ask that hon. member, who has been advocating for older workers and supports the targeted initiative for older workers, why would he vote against the budget when it would provide \$60 million over three years, for a total of \$50 million per year, to communities with a population of less than 250,000? Why would he vote against that measure, which is only one of a number of measures to protect Canadian workers who are facing a hard time? How can he justify voting against an initiative that he has been promoting for a number of years?

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member keeps asking why we voted against the budget. We voted against the budget to get rid of the Conservatives, to put a better government in place that would make sure that Canadians receive the support they need, not the way the Conservatives have done. The government's plan is to take the money from Canadians and legalize the stealing that the Liberals did with respect to that plan. That is what the Conservatives are doing.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Mr. Speaker, that member and his party have provided absolutely zero in EI benefits for workers, and yet at the same time they blow hot and cold.

They oppose hiring additional staff to meet the demands. How can they possibly do that? What is the rationale behind that? Why would they oppose a budget that has a number of provisions to help those who need help most? How can that member stand in the House and

say he opposes the budget at this particular time when the economy needs the very measures that we are proposing?

• (1100)

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the parliamentary secretary for sharing his time with me. It will be a tough act to follow with the knowledge that he has on this topic and the work that he has been doing on behalf of every Canadian in this country.

I welcome this opportunity to take part in this important debate initiated by the member for Hamilton Mountain, a member who I actually know quite well and respect and I appreciate her efforts on behalf of constituents. I just disagree with her politics on this particular item in the face of this global economic crisis.

I had the opportunity last night to visit Tsuneo Nishida, the Japanese Ambassador to Canada, who is an excellent representative of Japan. We had an excellent conversation and discussion about this being worldwide problem. Japan has unemployment issues as we have here. We have to understand that it is a global crisis, and not just Canada, but countries around the world, including our partners in Japan, are having the same difficulties.

Our government is very concerned about the plight of Canadians and those who have lost their jobs. We are determined to help them weather this storm and give them opportunities to acquire skills and to recover and adjust to the ever-changing demands of the global economy.

No Canadian worker is totally immune to the effects of this economic downturn. Yet the structural changes affecting the global economy mean that some communities have been hit worse than others. Indeed, some Canadians who have spent their whole working lives in the same industry now face the prospect of unemployment.

Those workers and their families face uncertainty. They worry about making ends meet and putting food on the table. They want to work and provide for their families. Canadians who have lost their jobs, or are at risk of losing them, have this government behind them and we stand up for them.

Changing industries and markets are inevitable in the global economy. While we cannot single-handedly bring jobs back to industries in decline, we are determined to help hardworking Canadians adjust to these changes in the global economy.

We believe in Canadian workers. We believe that those who have worked in the same industry for many years can learn new skills. We have faith in their ability to do so. These Canadians have decades of experience, and we take offence when members of the opposition say that older workers cannot be retrained and that older workers simply need to be bridged to retirement.

Business of Supply

We believe in the potential of older workers across Canada. That is why, as part of Canada's economic action plan, we are investing close to \$500 million over the next two years in measures to help these long-tenured workers facing job losses or unemployment during these difficult times.

Before I describe how these measures will work and whom they will benefit, let me provide some context. Research shows that structural changes affecting the Canadian and world economies are increasing the demand for a highly skilled and flexible workforce. This fact is driving the need for new and flexible approaches to how laid-off workers are trained.

Those who have worked a long time in a single industry have many assets and much experience, but they have specific job skills and are less transferrable to a new environment. Of all unemployed, those long-tenured workers are most likely to need skills upgrading. It is likely they need encouragement and incentives to gain those new skills that will help them, their families, and their communities prosper.

To thrive in the 21st century, our country needs workers who are able and willing to take their existing skills and expertise and quickly adapt them to a new context as the situation demands. We need workers who are ready to learn a new skill set altogether.

To that end, in partnership with the provinces and territories, our government is embarking on an initiative called the long-tenured workers pilot project. Through this project, we will extend benefit duration from the employment insurance program to long-tenured workers while they pursue training to embark on a profession in a new occupation or sector. We estimate about 40,000 Canadians will benefit from this pilot project.

• (1105)

Of course, even when they are armed with new skills, new jobs may not simply fall into their laps. That is why, in addition to extending benefits from the EI program during the training itself, this project will provide benefits for up to 12 weeks following the completion of training. This will give these individuals a financial cushion so that they can conduct their job search. All told, the pilot project will extend regular benefits up to 104 weeks.

In a complementary move, the economic action plan will help workers with severance and other separation payments to become eligible for earlier access to EI benefits if they use some or all of this severance to upgrade their skills or invest in training.

Through these measures, long-tenured workers can be eligible for up to two years of benefits under the long-tenured worker pilot project and can start receiving benefits sooner while receiving viable training to build new skills. That is truly a win-win result for Canadian workers and their families.

Many hard-working Canadians have held down good jobs for years and rarely, if ever, drawn on the EI program. Now when times are tough they deserve every opportunity to sharpen their skills without falling further behind. This pilot project will give them that chance.

As we can see, this government is taking action. Just today, as a matter of fact, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills

Development announced important enhancements to work-sharing agreements so more Canadians can continue working while their companies weather this temporary slowdown. The minister has extended work-sharing agreements by 14 weeks, to a maximum of 52 weeks, and increased access through greater flexibility and in the qualifying criteria.

Work sharing is designed to avoid layoffs by offering EI income benefits to qualifying workers to work a reduced work week while the employer recovers.

In the face of economic uncertainty, our economic action plan is designed to keep Canadians working and help unemployed Canadians get back to work and put our economy back on track while we do whatever it takes to help Canadians weather this economic storm.

We will pay special attention to those hard-working Canadians who need and want to start new careers so they can prosper in this global economy. We are delivering and helping Canadians in need.

While the NDP members like to propose uncosted, unaffordable solutions to the current economic crisis, our government is actually getting the job done. Yesterday in this place the reality was that the NDP members voted against helping 400,000 unemployed Canadians benefit from an additional five weeks of EI benefits. They voted against helping 50,000 unemployed Canadians who normally do not qualify for EI benefits get the training and skills they need to find a new job and provide for their families.

The NDP members voted against helping 100,000 people get additional funding and training to find new jobs and put food on the table for their families. They voted against helping 10,000 long-tenured auto, forestry and other workers get additional training and financial support they need to get back into the workforce.

That is a lot of voting against: no help for unemployed Canadians. If I were the NDP members I would look in the mirror hard before coming to this place and trying to tell Canadians that it is this government that is not helping Canadians. It is the NDP that is not helping Canadians today.

However, something good did happen yesterday. This government, with the help of other members of the House, voted yes to Canadians and passed the budget implementation bill at third reading. That is good news for Canadians. That means we are going to take a big step closer to implementing our economic action plan and providing support to Canadians who need it right now. The NDP members had nothing whatsoever to contribute to that vote in favour of Canadians.

Business of Supply

With that context, I would like to end this debate and I thank the House for this opportunity.

• (1110)

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I cannot wait to hear a learned position on EI. Therefore, I am going to wait for my colleague, the hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, to speak on EI.

The government member talked about this plan for the unemployed. We have given the government already an opportunity to avail itself of monies in order to create jobs. He talked about job creation. The auto industry in Ontario is devastated. The forestry industry everywhere is shedding jobs by the minute. Even now, in high-value research and development in the scientific medical fields, we have companies laying off graduates from PhD and MA programs.

The member is talking about an adjustment program. I want to know, and every other Canadian wants to know, what are the specifics of a plan that the government has in place to create jobs? We have given the government the money. We have given it the authority. It should show some responsibility and accountability and create the jobs.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Mr. Speaker, the member is very good at making a loud comment without making any sense.

Yesterday, he stood in the House and supported our economic action plan, an action plan that would put billions of dollars in the hands of provinces, municipalities and communities in order to create jobs through infrastructure development. I guess he did not read it or understand it. That plan is what will create jobs in my community, in Ontario and across the country.

It is a plan that will work. It is doable. We have support from all the provinces. We have support from every municipality. We will make it happen. As soon as we can get that money out the door, we will create jobs for Canadians across the country.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member and I are in neighbouring communities and he offered up the respect that he has for my colleague for Hamilton Mountain. We return that. He is a hardworking member, but he is wrong.

The Liberals have an awful lot of nerve getting up and criticizing anyone on EI, given the fact that they are the ones who changed the eligibility requirements, which has denied tens of thousands of Canadians their opportunity to receive it. They took the \$54 billion in the EI fund and used it for operating costs. Therefore, they have no ground here.

One thing we have asked for in our motion is an increase in the amount of money that an unemployed worker would get every week. When the minister was asked why there were no increases, her comments in the House were—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Burlington.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Mr. Speaker, there is a lot of yelling going on in the House today when members ask their questions. I appreciate that. I do not know if Canadians appreciate it, however.

I guess his question was, what are doing? In the economic action plan just passed, we have extended the benefits for the work-sharing program, which I talked about in my speech.

I am on the finance committee, and we had meetings with various people. Over and over again, we heard how good the work-sharing program was. However, the problem with it was we needed an extension. We have extended the work-sharing program to 52 weeks to help employers and employees get through these tough economic times.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desnoyers (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am directing this to the Conservative member. His speech is completely out of touch with reality. They should have consulted the workers' unions, but in Quebec the Conservatives did not consult any labour representatives. So I do not feel bad about belittling their phony consultations that have lead them to introduce such a bill.

The NDP motion is interesting: it reflects the position of Quebec, the Canadian Labour Congress and more than 2 million workers in Canada.

When the member says that their consultations are an accurate reflection of working people, he is completely out of touch with reality and he needs to realize that.

• (1115)

[*English*]

Mr. Mike Wallace: Mr. Speaker, I disagree with the premise of that question. I will give a specific example. The organization representing forestry workers across the country, and we hear a lot about forestry workers in Quebec, came to see us to talk about work-sharing and how it worked for them.

However, they need an extension. That is exactly what we did. We listened and acted, which is what is different about this government compared with past governments. We hear, listen and take action. That is what our economic action plan does.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise and lead off the Liberal debate on this issue. I am also pleased to split my time with one of the more distinguished and articulate members of the House, the member for Beauséjour.

This is an important motion. It deals with a critical component of Canada's social infrastructure, employment insurance. EI has been a vital part of our social safety net for generations. We all know it has undergone significant change in the past two decades. The fact is EI as we know it now is untested for the kind of difficult economic times we currently face.

I support the intent and spirit of this motion; that is I agree the government has failed Canadian workers who have lost their jobs and it has failed to make the necessary changes to EI that the times demand.

The events of the past few months are very troubling. This is a government that is adrift. The government has mismanaged this economy throughout the process.

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From last summer, when we started to see significant problems, the government put politics before people. Conservatives called an election and they produced an economic update. The only thing that stimulated was political uncertainty. Then they shut down Parliament. We all assumed they had learned from that experience and they did produce a budget that was markedly better than the junk that we saw in November. However, there are huge issues of difference between us and the Conservatives, and they are on a short leash.

One of those areas is EI. As a social investment, it is necessary. As a support for families, it is vital. Even as stimulus, a number of learned economists and academics have indicated that EI may be the best way to stimulate the economy. I refer to a study to which Ian Lee from the Spratt School of Business referred. The study was done for the senate in the United States on ranking different types of stimulus, infrastructure, tax cuts. It found that:

—Unemployment Insurance came out on top at one-point-six-one, which meant for every dollar dispersed to somebody unemployed, it generates a dollar-sixty-one of economic.

That is a pretty good stimulus.

We expected the budget would offer real solutions to help stimulate the economy, particularly as it related to EI. We expected big things for a couple of reasons. For one, the minister was suggesting quite proudly that she was going to do big things with EI as a means to help Canadians and to stimulate this economy.

Chris Hopkins from P.E.I. has been advocating for some time that self-employed persons need to be part of the EI system. However, Canadians were expecting more action.

I would like to quote from the Caledon Institute's report called "The Red Ink Budget", which came out recently:

Despite a growing clamour from across Canadian society to bolster and expand Employment Insurance, the 2009 Budget chose only to temporarily improve matters for the minority of the unemployed who meet existing work requirements....

This is the major shortcoming of the Budget in respect of offsetting some of the most serious consequences of the recession for ordinary Canadians.... If unemployment levels climb much higher, substantial numbers of the unemployed will have no other option than welfare - a much worse program than Employment Insurance.

The government failed. We expected this. We did not get it. The government could have brought in measures that would have increased access to EI, to people who otherwise did not qualify. It could have eliminated the two week waiting period. It could have extended the length of benefits. It could have based benefits on the best 12 weeks. It could have standardized benefits nationally. It could have eliminated distinctions between new and re-entrants. It could have increased the maximum insurable earnings. It could have boosted allowable earnings.

There are a number of things, but the government failed to use the EI system to really make a difference for Canadians. On top of that, it ignored another very serious issue, which is wait times.

Each day my office hears stories from Canadians across the country, who have to wait to get their EI cheques. On December 19 last year, I wrote the minister about the news we were getting from constituents, not just in my riding, but across the country. They were being told the processing time for claims had gone well beyond the 28 days for 80% of applicants, that it was closer to 40 days. I have yet to hear back from the minister.

Now others are realizing how right we were. I refer to an editorial in the Halifax *Chronicle-Herald* this week. The headline was "EI backlog needs fast fix". It states:

In any case, the jobless have bigger problems than getting the government to cushion the first two weeks of their unemployment. They're having trouble receiving timely benefit cheques, period.

Also from the *Herald* this week was the headline "Late EI payments to Atlantic Canadians unacceptable" said the Leader of the Opposition who was in Nova Scotia for the AGM.

● (1120)

Therefore, somebody is aware of this in the House. Other members in the House have spoken about this as well. The member for Madawaska—Restigouche, the member for Don Valley East and the member for Cape Breton—Canso have stood up. In fact, they are the only champions on that because they are not getting much support from the minister.

Canadian workers have earned these benefits through hard work and they have a right to those benefits when they need them, period. So unconcerned and so out of touch is the minister that she recently suggested she did not want to make EI "too lucrative". I ask all my colleagues here if that is the type of thinking we expect from the minister responsible for EI.

I can see some of my more hon. colleagues on the other side are shocked by that. They cannot believe what the minister would say about unemployed Canadians.

The leadership for the unemployed workers is coming from the opposition benches. On the waiting times issue, the Liberals have asked that this be fixed.

We can make a difference for Canadians. The motion is not perfect by a long shot, but it sends a message. Let us not allow perfection to be the enemy of better. Let us make it better. Liberals want a stronger EI system, particularly in difficult times. Canadians in the next election will either choose a government that believes in a stronger EI system or they will choose the government they currently have.

Not only are some of the measures in motion worthy of consideration, but others as well. In fact, in the last election, and I will quote from last year's Liberal platform, we addressed the issue of wait times before it became a crisis. The member for Beauséjour may remember this. I think he was involved in the platform. In our platform we said:

A Liberal government will also commit to processing EI claims faster, guaranteeing that EI cheques get delivered no more than three weeks after a completed application is filed.

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I also suggest that my colleague from Sydney—Victoria had a wonderful private member's bill in the last Parliament, which would have increased sick benefits from 15 weeks to 50 weeks. We heard from representatives of the Heart and Stroke Foundation, the Canadian Cancer Society, as well as representatives of workers, who said that this was not only a well-intentioned bill, it was sensible, good and timely. One of the positive things about our health care system is that people live longer after a heart attack. They live longer after they have suffered from cancer. However, they cannot get back to work in 15 weeks.

This is a solution through the EI system, and I applaud the member for Sydney—Victoria for the leadership he showed on that issue. Perhaps we should consider that as well. The government would do well to look at it and figure that part out. Every party in the House, with the exception of the Conservatives, supported that bill.

EI is not the only answer for tough times, but it is an essential component in providing support to Canada's workforce. I will vote for the motion and I hope it sends a strong message to the government that Canadians, who are losing their jobs in difficult times, deserve better.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, sometimes it is pretty hard to listen to Liberals say that if they were in power, we would not be in the mess we are in today. They are the ones who got us into this mess.

However, the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour said he would support the motion. However, I remember, when we brought in a motion on the best 12 weeks, the Liberals said they would vote for it. Does he have the support of all Liberals? Will Liberals vote for this motion on Tuesday night?

Why did he say that it was a pretty good motion, but it needed some work? What part of the motion does he not like? Is it the 360 hours that hurts the Liberals, because they feel that it is too low, that people will have more access to EI?

• (1125)

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, a number of parts of the motion make a lot of sense. I would not stand here today and tell the House which one of these things we will implement when we form a government, but I will say this. EI will be a central component of our campaign and of our government.

I remind my colleague, who is very passionate on this topic and I understand that, that every time in the last Parliament when a private member's bill or motion on EI came up, similar to the motion we are debating today, whether it was his Bill C-265 or Bill C-269 from my friend from the Bloc, Liberals voted for those. They did not vote because they were forced to do that. They voted because Liberals believe in employment insurance. We believe it is part of the social infrastructure of our country. Canadians will find out after the next election, if they choose, as I think they will, a Liberal government, that EI will be a central part of the reforms that we will bring to our country.

Mr. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my friend from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour for his intervention. I believe the previous Liberal government served four terms, three majority terms and one minority term for a total of 13 years. I have a very simple question for this member. Over those 13 years, what

specifically did the former Liberal government do to enhance EI benefits for Canadians?

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, the Liberals brought forward a number of benefits, including the best 14 weeks and a number of pilot projects in areas of high unemployment. I would remind him that we brought in the extended maternity benefits, as well.

I think all members have to keep in mind that when the Liberals formed the government last time, we faced a very bad economy. We picked up that economy and we had to fix the deficit from 1993 to 1997. We can look back at some of the measures and say, "I liked this, did not like this, liked this, did not like this," but we fixed this economy. The Liberals are going to have to do it again and we are going to have to do it again pretty soon.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have a simple question for my colleague.

Does he know that when they came to power in 1993, 88% of people who lost their jobs received employment insurance benefits and that when they lost power, this number had dropped to 39%?

[English]

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, we can all look at the so-called reforms to EI and judge whether we liked them or not. The first big hit on the government began with the Mulroney government in 1990.

I would repeat again that I was not a member of the government in the 1990s. If I had been a member of the government, I do not have any reason to believe that I would have voted against the budgets because those budgets in fact brought stability to this country. It turned us from what the economists referred to as an economic basket case. In areas like social infrastructure, health, education, EI and other measures, we have to be able to afford those. When we could, we brought in things like the child tax benefit which is one of the most important things in keeping the rate of child poverty down.

I am very proud of what the Liberal government did. That does not mean I agreed with everything it did, but I applaud the people who put their back into it and made this country more secure, put it on a more economically solid footing, and gave us a chance to weather this Conservative recession.

Business of Supply

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to begin by thanking my colleague from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour for sharing his time with me today in this important debate. He is a tireless advocate for improvements to social policy and has done a terrific job representing the Liberal Party on issues like employment insurance, child care and post-secondary education. I salute the hard work he has done on behalf of so many Canadians to improve these important programs.

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

I also want to thank my colleague from the NDP, the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain, for moving this very important motion today in the House of Commons. Like the hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, I will support it in the vote next week. Employment insurance remains a key issue, not only for people who lose their jobs but also for people who are trying to find ways to stimulate the Canadian economy in such difficult times.

The wording of the motion is very important because it addresses a number of issues that affect people who really depend on employment insurance to survive difficult economic situations or who are seasonally employed. I want to salute the people in my riding of Beauséjour who have worked so hard for years to improve employment insurance. I am thinking in particular of a committee of employers and employees in some seasonal industries, especially in the Cap-Pelé area but also in other parts of my riding. This committee worked with me and with the previous Liberal government to make improvements to the system. My colleague referred a little while ago to some of these pilot projects, for example basing the system on the 14 best weeks in the previous 52. This was a change for which people like Rodrigue Landry, Ronald LeBlanc, Aline Landry, Aurélie Denelle, and the former mayor of Cap-Pelé, Normand Vautour, worked very hard, trying to make changes that helped seasonal workers and also helped employers have workers. For example, these improvements enabled people to earn 40% of their employment insurance benefits without being penalized. This encouraged them to accept all available work. Five weeks were also added to deal with a difficult situation known as the black hole.

The challenge now is to make these pilot projects a permanent part of the Employment Insurance Act. That is what the Liberal Party promised. There was a formal commitment to make these pilot projects, which we developed several years ago, a permanent part of the act. I thought that was a good start toward improving the system. The government, though, simply tried to extend the pilot projects, which has caused a lot of uncertainty in these industries and among their workers. That is very regrettable.

The current economic situation requires some other improvements to employment insurance as well.

[*English*]

The two week waiting period, as some of my colleagues before have explained, and like the member for Acadie—Bathurst who explained it well, is not a two week waiting period. It is known as a waiting period, but in fact it is two weeks where the person who is applying for benefits will have no revenue. The person will have no income support for those two weeks. It is sort of like a deductible in an insurance policy, but they are a very punitive two weeks.

These people are not rich. For them to have no income for two weeks means that when they finally get their benefits, often 8 or 10 weeks later because of the backlog and failure to process the applications in time, they are massively behind in their bills. They are buying groceries on credit and are behind in paying the hydro bill or other bills. The two week waiting period needs to be reduced or eliminated. Workers' compensation regimes have perhaps a three day period. Why should employment insurance have 14 days?

The real issue, on top of that unfairness, is this horrible delay that people encounter now. MPs get calls in their constituency offices and hear of horrible examples where people are kicked out of apartments because they cannot pay rent due to waiting 55 days to receive an employment insurance benefit.

[*Translation*]

There is an organization in Shediac, in my riding, called Vestiaire Saint-Joseph. It is a food bank that serves hundreds of needy families in my region. The volunteers who work at Vestiaire Saint-Joseph often tell me that, because of the delays in employment insurance, families have to come to the food bank to get something to eat. This is an injustice that must be corrected.

Something should be done as well to deal with the regional rates issue.

[*English*]

There is a variable rate in terms of access. The number of hours that are needed to have access to employment insurance, or the number of weeks of benefits one would have depending on where that one happened to live, or what the unemployment rate might be in that particular census district, leads to great unfairness.

Let me use an example of somebody who lives in a suburb of Moncton called Lakeville. That individual goes to work 20 minutes down the road at a fish plant in Cap-Pelé or Shediac and works side by side with somebody who happens to live in the village where the fish processing plant is located. The person who commutes 20 minutes a day would need two or three times the number of hours to access employment insurance and that individual's benefits would last for a much shorter period of time, yet that individual worked side by side every day for the whole time he or she was qualifying for employment insurance.

The variable rate does not reflect labour force mobility in today's economy. If individuals go from my community to work in Fort McMurray and get laid off, as many people have in that particular area in the last number of months, and they then return to New Brunswick, they could benefit from an employment insurance regime different than that from the people they worked side by side with every day in Fort McMurray. That no longer makes sense in the economy of today.

Business of Supply

That is why I think it is a great idea to reduce the number of hours required for EI. The NDP has suggested this. My colleague from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour and a number of others in our Quebec caucus have worked hard to try to reduce the number of hours required by part-time workers, new Canadians, thousands of workers in Ontario who find themselves losing their jobs because of the difficult economic circumstances and the neglect of the government to act. These individuals are unable to access employment insurance because of a regime which no longer reflects the economy of today. I very much support the effort to reduce the number of hours required for employment insurance.

Self-employed Canadians should be eligible for employment insurance benefits, particularly parental leave benefits, sickness benefits, or compassionate care leave. The previous Liberal government increased the number of weeks one could have with respect to parental leave. We tried to bring in a compassionate care leave provision. These were important improvements that were made in employment insurance. We can go further.

My colleague from Sydney—Victoria, who happens to share this desk in the House of Commons with me, has brought forward an important bill that would extend the number of weeks for people in the case of a serious illness.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

My colleague from Madawaska—Restigouche also introduced bills to reduce the waiting period and to make employment insurance available to parents who have to take a child to the children's hospital in Halifax because there are no similar facilities in New Brunswick. Parents who accompany their children to Halifax are deprived of employment insurance. I think improvements can be made here.

[*English*]

I will be supporting this motion with considerable enthusiasm because it highlights the government's failure to improve employment insurance. Adding five weeks at the end of a claim would not be as important as removing the two weeks at the beginning where an individual is punished, or dealing with the five, six, seven, sometimes ten weeks of delay in receiving benefits or improving accessibility. We will continue to work on these issues.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Beauséjour for his speech. My only problem is that while it would be great if what he is suggesting could be achieved, the fact is that the Liberals have formed the government in the past. My question is this.

He agreed with me that for the workers in my riding and those in Beauséjour who work in fish plants, the best 12 weeks of earnings should be used to file an employment insurance claim. Can the member explain to my why, in June 2005, under the Paul Martin government, he voted against this motion for the 12 best weeks, although some Liberals voted to support such a measure? He is now trying to say that the Liberals will save everyone. The hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour really let the cat out of the bag earlier. In 1994, there was a financial problem, but was it really right to

attack the workers who had lost their jobs? Are the Liberals any better than the Conservatives? That is my question.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst raised the question of the best weeks. In his region, like in Cape Breton and Newfoundland and Labrador, where the unemployment rate tends to be very high, people need the best 12 weeks. I will support a motion that refers to the best 12 weeks as the divisor, and I will gladly vote in favour of the NDP motion on Tuesday.

My hon. colleague referred to the situation in 2005. In 2005, at the request of the seasonal workers' and employers' committee in my region, and by working with other members of the Liberal caucus, the Liberal government made a major improvement to the system by basing the calculation on the best 14 out of 52 weeks. The hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst repeatedly talked about 12 weeks.

The day we successfully obtained the best 14 weeks, the seasonal workers' committee in my riding organized a party to celebrate this significant achievement. I commend the former government for having improved the employment insurance system in this way.

• (1140)

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to hear our Liberal colleagues say that they will vote for this motion. However, I cannot help but feel a little skeptical.

A motion in the House on an opposition day is a motion of intention. It is an invitation. It says "in the opinion of the House", so it is not binding on the government. It is, however, a very strong message to the government urging it to proceed.

The Bloc Québécois introduced Bill C-308, which reiterates the motion's objectives almost entirely. Will our Liberal friends support it? This time, will they see this through and ask the Prime Minister to give the royal recommendation, which has been his objection thus far? Will they see it through this time?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Chambly—Borduas talked about Bloc bills relating to employment insurance.

During the last Parliament, we supported bills. I understand the distinction he is making between an opposition motion and a bill. During the last Parliament, I personally supported the Bloc bill to improve employment insurance.

I also intend to support Bill C-308 because it puts pressure on the government to do something now. What I find so deplorable is that the Conservatives will bring up technicalities to prevent this bill from being passed at third reading during the final vote.

Business of Supply

I want to assure my Bloc colleague that the most important thing is that the next government, a Liberal government, will table a budget in the House that improves employment insurance. We will deal with the two week waiting period and we will improve employment insurance for people who depend on it when they lose their jobs, which is what is happening because of this economic crisis.

I look forward to the day when we have a Liberal government that will make employment insurance a priority, as my colleague said, and will continue to improve not only the benefits paid, but also access to benefits, which is a critical problem in many regions of the country.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I also want to thank my colleague from Hamilton Mountain on proposing this motion this morning.

The debate we are holding today could be called “the dignity or deceit debate”. Allow me to explain. When I refer to dignity, I am talking about the dignity we need to give the unemployed, who did not choose to lose their jobs. When I refer to deceit, I am talking about how, since the early 1990s, the unemployed have been robbed of the tool the government created to support people who lose their jobs: the employment insurance fund.

The employment insurance fund used to be called the unemployment fund. The unemployment insurance program paid benefits to people who lost their jobs. That program was changed and given a new look. We did not want that change. Two successive federal governments changed that concept, in order to use the program in a different way.

As I said, the employment insurance fund is the only tool the unemployed have. Workers and their employers are the only contributors to this fund, which will help workers if they are unfortunate enough to lose their jobs. That is why the EI fund is also known as an insurance policy. I will not go on too long about this. I just wanted to remind this House about the nature of this tool.

This tool is structured to cover unforeseen circumstances. The unemployment rate is sometimes very high. Depending on the region, it has sometimes fluctuated between 8% and 9%, and it has reached 18% in some areas. There are even places where it has climbed to over 20%. Every time, the fund has fulfilled its commitments to the unemployed. Today, contributions are \$1.73 per \$100, but they have been as high as \$3.20 per \$100. When unemployment was higher, contributions automatically increased. Sometimes, the government came to the rescue for brief periods when contributions were not enough to cover benefits. But each time, the fund paid the government back.

In the mid 1980s, the Auditor General said that it might be a good idea to move the fund to the national budget, so it could be administered along with it. The accounting of it has, however, always been separate in order to meet obligations. The recommendation was made in 1985-86. In 1988 or 1989, the government accepted the recommendation.

Things became complicated when Canada found itself with an exponentially growing debt. When the Conservatives arrived on the scene, I think the Canadian government debt amounted to

\$93 billion. While the Conservatives were in office, they drove the debt to a little over \$500 billion. Shortly before, Mr. Trudeau and his government had also contributed significantly to increasing the country's debt. This lack of concern over controlling the debt gave rise to public pressure, and the government had to do something.

● (1145)

Instead of looking for new sources of funding, however, the government dipped into a source not intended for the purpose. Beginning in the 1990s, the Conservatives began dipping into the fund. Subsequently, the Liberals made substantial use of it to the point that, by 1997, the fund had generated a surplus of \$7 billion. Incredible.

And how did the fund generate a surplus of over \$7 billion? The Liberals limited the conditions of eligibility so that accessibility to the plan, which was capable of providing benefits to 88% of people who had lost their job, was limited to 40% of the unemployed. According to the human resources department, the figure now is 46%.

This spells disaster for people who lose their job, their family, the regions and the provinces concerned, such as Quebec. The approach is totally disgraceful. The government paid off the debt little by little by appallingly taxing people who lost their job. They were denied a source of income that would provide a living for them, to the tune, today, of \$57 billion. This is money taken from the employment insurance fund.

That is unacceptable. I find it hard to understand how the two major national parties are so comfortable with this situation. Not only are they comfortable with it, but they created it, are perpetuating it and continue to defend it. It is a huge swindle.

In legal terms, the Supreme Court ruled on it and said that, technically, the government was entitled to do what it was doing, because it had the power to collect taxes in different ways. This is one approach. Technically, the Supreme Court said it could. Ethically and in terms of its justice, however, should we tolerate this situation and allow it to continue—justice being our first concern—or should we not change tack today and correct the situation?

The deceit continues. Yesterday's vote on Bill C-10 will not correct the situation. With this budget, the two major parties have given the government the green light to keep contributions to employment insurance at their lowest level since 1982. What does that mean. It means that the government is putting a lock on any possibility of improving the employment insurance plan. Things are now twice as difficult.

We listened to our Liberal friends this morning. I am pleased with what they said but I am not pleased about what they did yesterday. It makes us skeptical about their discourse. Are they aware that what they are saying today cannot be taken to its logical conclusion without turning around and authorizing increases in contributions to keep step with needs, especially in an economic downturn such as the one we are experiencing now.

Business of Supply

●(1150)

That would be quite in step with the recommendations made by groups concerned. These groups are the employers who also contribute to the fund, and the unemployed or the unions. We have to improve the employment insurance system and improve its accessibility.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, in a December 2004 report completed in February 2005, made 28 recommendations, including the measures proposed in this morning's motion. Thus, both governments, the previous Liberal government and then the Conservative government, did not follow through. They found all manner of subterfuges to not follow through. That is also a form of deceit. There is no getting around it. It is a serious economic crime.

Every riding is out an average of \$30 million annually. Not only does this impoverish the unemployed, it impoverishes their families, the regions, the provinces and, as I was saying earlier, Quebec. In the end, people contributed to an employment insurance fund in order to have an income if they had the misfortune of losing their job. But they do not get their money because Ottawa is holding it back. Thus, the province has to step in and support these people who do not have an income. At that point, welfare kicks in. The same people pay twice for a service provided by their province even though the latter should not have that responsibility. But it is forced to assume it because the federal government has sloughed it off. And the fiscal imbalance increases even further.

Thus, responsibility rests with the two major parties, as I mentioned earlier.

I will begin the second part of my speech by referring to something which most of our mothers have probably told us. In any case, it is something that my mother often said to me: "My boy, if you are not able to keep your word, if you are not able to honour your signature, if you dishonour your family, then of course you dishonour yourself". In this Parliament, there are parties that have not honoured their commitments, not kept their word, and not honoured their signature.

I will give two examples. Let us take the Liberal Party. During the election campaign, it made a formal commitment, hand on heart, to help to ensure that this Parliament adopts measures to make employment insurance more accessible and to eliminate the waiting period—a formal commitment. In a joint platform signed by the three opposition parties on December 1, 2008—three months ago—the Liberal Party undertook to ensure that the program for older worker adjustment, POWA, was restored, that the waiting period was eliminated, and that the employment insurance fund would henceforth be used only to assist unemployed persons. This was barely three months ago. The Liberal Party's vote yesterday on Bill C-10 is flatly contrary to that—three months later. Therefore that party has not kept its word, not honoured its signature.

●(1155)

As a result, the other opposition parties are very much afraid that they will be unable to depend on the word and the signature of the Liberal Party. Under the circumstances, given that this motion

expresses an opinion to the government, that it is not binding on the government and does not create any constraints, we are very skeptical that the Liberal Party will again honour to the end its signature and its commitment.

It is very important to continue this debate and to continue to focus on the behaviour of the Liberal Party, to make sure that it understands that the three opposition parties form the majority and that they have a mandate from the population to see to it that the Conservatives do not act as if they were the majority and do not continue to implement their ideological decisions and programs. That should be the framework of the Liberals at this time. We have a responsibility. The mandate the people have given the majority opposition is to keep an eye on the government and ensure that the programs proposed are actually carried out. That is why we were elected.

In December, the coalition's platform was created on the basis of these programs. The opposition parties looked in their programs for points in common, constituting a platform which would gradually take us out of the economic crisis. The objective was to kick-start the economy, so that in four years we might again have a balanced budget with a deficit of \$23 to \$27 billion during this period, with a very specific program.

There is something here that does not respect electors' wishes. The Liberals' behaviour denies us the mandate we have been given. This I stress very strongly—more so than the content of the employment insurance program. For it will determine the way things turn out. If the Liberals are not going to honour their commitment to the end, we will never be able to rectify the employment insurance program. This injustice must be corrected.

This injustice can be corrected, formally, by voting for two bills, among others, which the Bloc Québécois has already introduced. That is why we are pleased that the NDP is joining us on this platform. I refer to Bill C-241 introduced by my colleague from Brome—Missisquoi, which concerns the elimination of the waiting period and which, incidentally, does not create enormous costs since these are only administrative expenses and there is no addition to the number of weeks.

We must therefore carry this through to the end and vote in favour of Bill C-241, which is presently in second reading. We must also vote in favour of Bill C-308 which it has been my honour to introduce myself, and which covers all the other elements of today's motion so as to make the employment insurance system more accessible and improve it in a manner that respects the dignity of unemployed Canadians.

●(1200)

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would first like to thank the member for Chambly—Borduas for all his work. I have known him, and he has sat in the House, for a number of years now. He has seen everything. He has seen the Liberals in office and he has seen the Conservatives in office. We do wonder about people's sincerity.

I liked it when he said that his mother had told him that if he did not honour his signature, he brought dishonour on the family. That is just what has happened in the House of Commons with the Liberals and Conservatives. And yet, we cannot blame the Liberals, because they always stepped up to say certain things. In my opinion, that is not much help. These people have to find work.

They do not support the employment insurance system because they have never voted in favour of it. They never pretended they were in favour of it. At least they are honest in this regard.

The Liberals say they are willing to make changes here and there.

I heard the member say earlier that the Conservatives had dipped into the employment insurance fund. It was the Liberals who snatched the employment insurance fund, and the Conservatives who legalized it, after the fact.

Does he agree with me that that is exactly what happened? They took money from the most vulnerable. They convinced themselves that workers were dependent on the employment insurance fund.

Does my colleague agree with me that it is the government that is dependent on the employment insurance fund because they lined their coffers with \$57 billion from that fund?

• (1205)

Mr. Yves Lessard: Madam Speaker, please excuse me. I lose my voice sometimes. I was having difficulty speaking earlier. I apologize. It is a minor problem with my vocal cords, nothing more.

I thank my colleague, who is doing a remarkable job, as well, and I recognize that he has consistently defended the unemployed and, in fact all workers. He is quite right, because what happened is irregular and abnormal. However, the government wanted to normalize its action, and no one is bothered by it anymore.

This morning I was happy and somewhat relieved to hear my colleague from Acadie—Bathurst go on the offensive and get angry at the situation. Few people are bothered by it, because what was totally abnormal and unfair is now normal. What the Liberals and Conservatives did is not right and they are continuing to do it. It is not right, not fair and causes families to suffer.

[English]

Hon. Lynne Yelich (Minister of State (Western Economic Diversification), CPC): Madam Speaker, I was just thinking of people in my riding who have been talking about employment insurance, people who work in small and medium size businesses. They have some of concerns about the increase in premiums. They find it very difficult with the different taxes and deductions they have to match.

I want to know if the member has any response to, for example, the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association, which says it supports the government and the steps it is taking to ensure unemployed Canadians have access to the EI benefits they need without increasing the cost to employers. I am wondering if the member understands the difficulties businesses and employers have when premiums go up, and whether those difficulties are acknowledged in some of the suggestions he is making for the changes he desires.

Business of Supply

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Madam Speaker, that is a good question, but we have to look at the big picture. We have to realize that the crisis is not just affecting workers; it is affecting merchants and business people and so on. That is why any measures to help these people have to take their reality into account.

For example, tax credits do not help businesses that are barely surviving and not making a profit. Even so, that is what the government chose to do. With this budget, the government will be helping big corporations that are making a profit. That is the real issue here.

I happen to know about the restaurant sector because I worked in it for a while and I know how unstable it can be.

The question my colleague should be asking is this: Has the Conservative Party failed to understand that cutting taxes for big companies will not help small restaurant operators like the people she just talked about?

Mr. Luc Desnoyers (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Chambly—Borduas for his excellent presentation. Once again, the minister of state has made it clear just how out of touch the Conservatives are. They are talking about businesses instead of talking about the people affected by this crisis: the working men and women who suffer every day, who grow poorer day by day, who cannot, on a daily basis, make ends meet for their families.

The NDP motion is a response to the demands of over two million workers. The members of the Canadian Labour Congress have been making these demands for a long time. I do not know who the Conservatives consulted, but I am concerned because they clearly did not consult the workers affected by the crisis.

I would like to ask my colleague a question about job creation. Currently, massive layoffs are happening everywhere: in parts manufacturing, in aerospace, and in automobile and bus manufacturing. As my colleague pointed out, programs like POWA and work sharing can help workers and employers make it through the crisis because workers are the ones with the expertise. That is my question for my colleague.

• (1210)

Mr. Yves Lessard: Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Rivière-des-Mille-Îles. He is doing excellent work. He is a young member and he is already making his mark in his riding, where he is certainly appreciated.

His question is very relevant. First of all, there are two parts to his question. I want to confirm that no one from any of the groups I meet with—the unemployed, unions or others—has been consulted. I have personally met all these people over the past months and they were not consulted. There were a privileged few, but never an organization as such.

Business of Supply

As for the other point, he is completely right. The program for older worker adjustment, which was in place from 1988 to 1997, cost only \$17 million at the time and would cost the Canadian government \$45 million. It would help all workers over the age of 55 who lose their jobs and cannot find another one. People are not lazy. Those who can find a job will work, but some of them cannot find jobs. Both employers and workers are asking that this program be reinstated because employers are concerned about their workers' futures. When someone has given years, dozens of years, of service to a company, that company does not want to see the worker go to live in poverty.

The work sharing program must be adapted so that it is easier to access. I have had to intervene so that more businesses could access it. It is a program that needs to be perfected, but it is very useful. On that note, I would like to point out that we are available to help make it more accessible, as long as the government is also willing to do its part.

[English]

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Madam Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan.

We are in the midst of a major economic crisis and the livelihood of millions of Canadians is at risk. Hundreds of thousands of people with jobs in forestry, general and automotive manufacturing, media, information technology and the service industry have felt the pain of being laid off or losing their jobs in the last few months. Sadly, the finance minister has said this will continue for quite some time. Yet for the last decade we have seen assistance for these workers become harder to obtain, to the point that only about 30% of the workers who pay into the employment insurance fund can draw from it when they need to. With an EI fund surplus in the tens of billions of dollars, this injustice must stop.

The government, among its many unprincipled and wrong-headed decisions, has chosen to give \$60 billion in tax cuts to Canada's most profitable companies instead of giving a few hundred dollars to struggling families. It claims to want to help the economy by putting money into Canadians' pockets, but it does absolutely everything in its power to ensure that it does the opposite for Canadians who need the money the most. The government feels no shame.

All working Canadians and every company that employs them must pay into the EI fund. This money is there for workers. It is insurance in case they lose their employment. It is there to help families keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. However, the money is not being used in this manner. It is sitting there in a fund gathering dust as working families suffer.

The government has a moral obligation to make these funds flow into the pockets of hard-working Canadians who put it there but who now need it in this time of crisis. This money could help forestry workers, the tens of thousands of whom have been laid off from their jobs. More than a million Canadian jobs are linked to the forestry industry. In the last five years the forestry sector has lost 40,000 jobs. More than 4,000 forestry workers were laid off in the last month alone. Today another 500 have been laid off in Nova Scotia, and they have to wait two weeks without income to get employment insurance, if they are among the lucky 30% or so who even qualify.

Mills have closed or shut down on a temporary basis right across the country, even in Prince Edward Island.

The forestry crisis is a national crisis and the government has ignored the difficulties for far too long. Now is the time to eliminate the two week waiting period. Now is the time to reduce the qualifying period to a minimum of 360 hours of work regardless of any regional rate of unemployment. Now is the time to allow self-employed workers to participate in this plan. Now is the time to raise the benefits to 60% and base benefit rates on the best 12 weeks in the qualifying period. Now is the time to encourage training and retraining.

There are more ominous signs on the horizon for my riding. The government says it is the champion of small business, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, I am going to talk about a couple of examples where the government is hindering employment and employment opportunities and potentially creating unemployment.

Of the two most recent examples in my riding, the first is a manufacturing company that has been in business for 40 years and is ready to expand. Yes, in this time of recession, it is ready to expand. That company could hire 35 more workers, highly skilled workers who live right in my riding and who are unemployed right now. They could be working if credit were freed up.

I received a notice in the mail the other day that the interest rate is going up at my bank, and the Bank of Canada rate is sitting at half of one percentage point. There is a real disconnect there. This is something the government could do something about.

• (1215)

The second is a company that distributes a product right across North America, but the product is not manufactured anywhere in North America. In fact, this company holds the North American patent on this product. Last month the company was told by the government that it now has to pay duties of 170% on this product. This is a product, I will emphasize again, that is made nowhere in North America and this distribution company holds the patent on it. Now the company has to pay 170%.

I talked to the owner of the company. When this business closes or when it moves to Minnesota, 18 people in that company will be looking for work. It is an export company. Most of its exports go to the United States. This is a good solid company in my riding, and now it is in danger of closing or having to move to another country.

Let me go back to forestry for one second to show how dire the circumstances are for the workers in my riding and, I would suggest, right across the entire country.

Business of Supply

The word the other day from Northern Hardwoods in Thunder Bay was that it will turn off the heat and lights. There are two stages when a company decides to close its business. The first stage is the company shuts down, either temporarily or for a longer indefinite period of time. The second stage is when the company makes a decision to turn off the heat and electricity. The reason that is such a drastic step is it will cost tens of millions of dollars to get that mill back up and running. Sensitive computer equipment and all sorts of other equipment and the structure itself begin to deteriorate when the heat and the electricity are turned off. That is what the company announced a couple of days ago. There are more and more companies right across Canada and indeed North America that are facing the same situation.

I ask the government to heed the call of this motion very carefully. In my riding, in fact right across northern Ontario, we have been in a recession for three or four years now. This is nothing new to us. We are a strong bunch. We will struggle and we will continue. However, when we have a situation where people who have paid into an insurance fund are unable to access it, or have to wait two weeks, or there is no plan for training or retraining, it is disastrous for the smaller communities in my riding.

• (1220)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing, NDP): Madam Speaker, my colleague speaks with passion with regard to the needs of our communities in the north and across Canada as a whole, given the fact that we have seen so much job loss.

The Conservatives talk about retraining. We are not sure who will actually train these people, given that so many jobs have been lost. What is of interest is that last night during an interview, the Conservatives said that people who are unemployed do not need the money when they are first laid off, that they need it after.

I want to ask the member if he thinks that the government of the day should actually decide how someone's budget works and when a person needs the money.

Mr. John Rafferty: Madam Speaker, the member is absolutely right. Along with all the problems that someone faces when he or she loses his or her job, it is a horrible situation for the person's family as well. When the major bread earner loses his or her employment, it can be devastating for the family. The last thing a person needs to worry about is where those two weeks of employment insurance will come from and how he or she will continue to feed, clothe and house the children and try to carry on at least in a normal sense until the he or she can begin searching for other work. It makes much more sense to eliminate the two week waiting period.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Madam Speaker, I listened with interest to the hon. member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River. I want to read a quote from David Dodge and then I have a couple of quick questions. He talked about the two weeks being earlier or later. He said, "That two weeks is there for a very good reason. Moreover, many of the people who are being laid off get some sort of bridge payment through that period, so that's not where the real issue is. The real issue is that some of these people are going to be off work for a rather long period of time..."

Let us relate that to the auto industry. We cannot go from over 17 million vehicles to less than 11 million vehicles on a permanent basis and not expect that some of that job loss is going to be permanent.

First, is there not some sense in giving people more time later to get retrained and get into the workforce in another position? Second, has the NDP costed all these measures?

Mr. John Rafferty: Madam Speaker, I would suggest to the member that those two weeks are in fact very critical, regardless of whether someone is being laid off from work or has lost that job either permanently or for a short period of time.

Those two weeks are critical because we are talking about families who need help. In the case of those two weeks, perhaps they can have a little less to worry about as they begin their job search and continue to look at other options for themselves and their families.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Madam Speaker, I have a really short question. It is the second part of my question. Has the NDP costed these measures?

• (1225)

Mr. John Rafferty: Madam Speaker, I would suggest to the member that billions of dollars taken over the last number of years is gathering dust right now. That money belongs in EI. It should be going to workers and their families. I would like to see that money returned to them.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing, NDP): Madam Speaker, when we are talking about the costing issue, it would be really important to note that the cost to those who do not get their money is much more than what the government says it is going to cost. The money is there. Maybe the member could answer as to the impact on women of this, given the fact that very few women are able to access unemployment insurance.

Mr. John Rafferty: Madam Speaker, we all know that women have less access to EI funds than men do. It is a serious problem. If I could just go back briefly to the hon. government member, perhaps we could talk about a couple of other issues I talked about, which involve the government actually creating an unemployment problem. Perhaps we could come to some resolution.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to thank the member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River for sharing his time with me. I also want to thank the member for Hamilton Mountain for introducing this very important motion, as well as the member for Acadie—Bathurst for the amount of work he has done over a number of years to try to get the Liberal and Conservative governments' attention regarding the importance of looking at some dramatic changes to the employment insurance fund.

Prior to 1995, when it was called unemployment insurance, the fund was much more responsive to workers' needs. What we have found over the last 10 or so years is that the ability for the employment insurance fund to provide a meaningful social safety net for workers has been eroded, and now substantial numbers of workers across this country simply do not qualify.

One of the important reasons for having a viable employment insurance fund is that it protects the most vulnerable workers and families in the country.

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In my own riding of Nanaimo—Cowichan, over the last number of years we have seen an erosion of the forestry sector. Of course, the deeply flawed softwood lumber agreement has exacerbated the crisis in the forestry sector. In my own riding and on Vancouver Island, we are also suffering from raw log exports. We are watching the resources from our communities being shipped somewhere else for processing. One after another, our sawmills are closing down, and of course the supporting industries to those sawmills are also closing down. We lost Madill, which provided heavy equipment to the forestry sector. That company had been in business for about 100 years, and it has closed its doors. This kind of carnage in the forestry sector has untold impacts on the rest of our economy. Whether it is restaurants, whether it is other service industries, whether it is clothing stores, they are all being impacted by the fact that these well-paying jobs are no longer in our community.

In the motion we are proposing, we are talking about eliminating the two-week waiting period, reducing the qualifying period to a minimum of 360 hours, allowing self-employed workers to participate, raising the benefit rate to 60%, and so on.

I want to put a bit of a face to this. When we talk about workers, we are talking about people and their families, and I want to quote from a couple of emails I have received.

Kirk Smith wrote, “I was under the false assumption that if I had contributed for 35 years, I would at least be entitled to one year’s benefits, but the receipt of benefits is only based on the current year’s contributions”.

Then he had some questions: “When the five-week extension of the benefits becomes law, will I be able to collect them after my claim has run out? Can the laws be changed to take into consideration the number of unclaimed years a worker has contributed to the plan? The current system seems grossly unfair, when only the current year of contributions is taken into account”.

He goes on to say, further on in his email, “I am slowly going broke”.

I received another email from Cathy and Wayne Kaye. It says in part, “My husband received word last Tuesday that his mill at Western Forest Products in Nanaimo is being shut down indefinitely due to the global economic crisis. The future of what was once the stronghold of the province’s economic structure is dwindling into obscurity”.

I received an email from Shelley Osborne about her husband’s situation. She wrote about the fact that he was only allowed 24 weeks of unemployment insurance, that he is 54 years old and has been in the forestry industry for 31 years, and that he was working with Ted LeRoy Trucking, which has now applied for creditor protection.

I have a letter that came out from a number of organizations, including the United Steelworkers, the Coast Forest Products Association, the Interior Forest Labour Relations Association, and so on. They wrote to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and specifically asked the minister to take into account that 28% of the current forest industry unionized employees have worked fewer than 420 hours in the past year and 39.6% have worked fewer than 700 hours.

I know many of us have received email after email talking about what it means to families to lose their jobs and then find out that either they do not qualify for employment insurance because they have not worked enough hours—and the 360 hours would capture a significant number of these workers—or, in my area, that they are affected by this anomaly that ties the unemployment rate to the Vancouver labour market.

• (1230)

The unemployment rate in Nanaimo—Cowichan is significantly higher, but because of the regional anomaly, people are paid for fewer weeks on a claim because the unemployment rate is lower in Vancouver. That makes absolutely no sense.

I have written to ask the minister to consider realigning the region so that the labour market appropriately reflects what is happening in Nanaimo—Cowichan, and the minister has the ability to do this. I have to tell the minister that in British Columbia, Vancouver Island is an entity separate from Vancouver. In fact, a body of water separates them. We need to have the Vancouver Island labour market considered separately from that of Vancouver. This would allow many workers to extend the length of their claims. I would urge the minister to take a look at that so that we do not have workers sliding off employment insurance and onto welfare.

There is a very good reason for us to talk about putting money into the employment insurance fund to allow workers to either qualify for benefits or to have their benefits extended beyond the five weeks that the government has offered.

One of them is called the multiplier effect. The multiplier formula put forward by Ian Lee from Carleton University shows that every dollar spent on employment insurance results in \$1.64 being injected into the economy. Mr. Lee says that there is a much quicker response in the economy through providing people with some income because the EI money has little red tape attached to it and can be counted on to flow through the economy in a predictable fashion.

We know that when workers and their families receive employment insurance, they go and spend it locally: they buy groceries, they pay the rent, they pay their mortgage. We have a tangible impact on the local economy. To me it would make sense to make sure workers have an income so that they can survive and buy things in their own local cities and towns and villages. It is that kind of immediate economic stimulus that would have a direct impact on the health and well-being of our communities.

In the context of the discussion today, I want to remind Canadians who are paying attention that the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development said, “We do not want to make it lucrative for them to stay at home and get paid for it, not when we still have significant skills shortages in many parts of this country”. I would be hard pressed to say that on an average of \$447 a week, someone is having a lucrative living. If the minister thinks that is such a great income, I would suggest that she try living on it and try to feed her family, pay her mortgage and maybe make her car payment.

I would urge members of the House to support the NDP motion, which would have our communities remain livable and maintain a quality of life that each and every one of us would wish for our own families.

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A member asked if the NDP had costed these proposals. Absolutely. We have estimated that they would cost \$3.33 billion. We had \$57 billion in the employment insurance fund misappropriated by the current and previous governments. This money was used for deficit reduction. It was used in the consolidated revenue fund. That money should have been put aside so that when there was an economic downturn, as inevitably happens in an economic cycle, there would be money available for workers and their families and money available for significant retraining, because many industries are now having to restructure and are looking at the fact that they are going to retrain even their existing workers. That money was paid by workers and their companies, and that money should remain for the use of workers and their companies.

In closing, I would urge the House to support this very important motion, to support the most vulnerable in our communities and to vote “yes” when this comes up for a vote.

• (1235)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. member who, over the years, has been a consistent advocate on behalf of those in need. EI has been on the agenda of Parliament ever since I came here in 1993.

One of the elements in the motion before us today has to do with self-employed workers. I am asking for information for those who might be watching the debate because it might tend to raise expectations and we really should be clear.

I understand that studies have been going on about having eligibility for parental and maternity leave benefits, sick benefits, et cetera, but the real question comes down to whether or not laying one's self off would allow one to qualify for benefits.

Second, would a self-employed person be responsible for effectively paying the premium, both parts of it, where the employee pays one part and the employer pays 1.4 times that additionally?

For clarification, how might the self-employed worker system work?

Ms. Jean Crowder: Madam Speaker, that is a fairly complicated question, given the amount of time I have to answer. However, I will touch on a couple of points.

The discussion around self-employed workers has been going on at various committees for a number of years. For example, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women started looking at self-employed workers and the potential for maternity benefits.

Sometimes it seems that what happens in this House is that when in doubt, conduct a study, then when we do not want to make a decision, have another study and then study the study. This discussion has been going on for a significant number of years.

I would argue that we do have the resources to frame how people would get paid employment insurance if they were self-employed. The Canada Revenue Agency has extensive experience in determining what employment is insurable in the current context of a worker-employer relationship. Some of that criteria could be transferred to self-employed workers,

There could be other mechanisms. For example, there is significant labour market information that can determine where

there are downturns in particular sectors. There are mechanisms that could be used to determine whether self-employed workers were laying themselves off when there could be work available.

There is an adjudication process within employment insurance that takes a look at whether people have voluntarily quit their jobs. That could also be employed for self-employed workers.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, NDP): Madam Speaker, my colleague really touched upon some of the issues. The fact is that the biggest economic stimulus we could have is ensuring that people contributing to EI actually have access to EI.

She also talked about the cost of EI. The cost of EI is not really that great when we consider that these people have actually paid into it. What is a shame, as she has mentioned, is the fact that the Liberals and the Conservatives have dipped into that pot to either give corporate tax cuts to their friends or put it into general revenue.

What does my colleague feel the impact is on someone who does not have EI. What is the impact on the municipalities? Where do they actually get their money? I am sure she will agree with me that it is probably through social services, which has an even bigger impact on those municipalities.

• (1240)

Ms. Jean Crowder: Madam Speaker, different provinces have different arrangements for how social assistance is paid. I am from British Columbia where it is a little different than Ontario. However, my understanding is that in Ontario the municipalities end up being on the hook for at least a portion of income assistance or welfare, depending upon what each province calls it.

This is another example of downloading. Many levels of government have continued to offload, download or softload to the next level of government. In this case, we have a federal government that is abdicating its responsibility as the manager of the employment insurance fund and shoving it down to either the provincial or municipal levels.

What we know is that the municipalities have limited ability to raise revenue. If the government is going to increase their costs without any input from them, they will need to cut other vital services.

I would argue that if the government will take that kind of approach to fiscal management. It often talks about accountability and transparency but it needs to include those other levels of government in the discussion about the impact on their own budgets.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to say that I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Saskatoon—Wanuskewin.

Business of Supply

I am pleased to rise today in this debate proposed by the representative for the riding of Hamilton Mountain. Our government is very concerned about the current economic situation. It is concerned about the employment situation in Canada and about the industries that are struggling. It is concerned about the all too many families that are in financial difficulty because of the economic crisis. We are not the only ones who are concerned. A recent Ipsos-Reid poll showed that one Canadian in four is worried about losing his or her job because of the current economic crisis.

I want to tell these people today that our government is unwavering in its desire to help them get through these difficult times. For our government, the status quo and doing nothing are not possible options. A time when our economy is being shaken by worldwide shock waves is no time simply to fold our arms. On the contrary, we have implemented a number of measures over the last months, and more recently, there is our economic action plan, which includes massive, rapid, targeted investments. We are tackling this crisis, taking the bull by the horns so to speak, in order to help out families, working people and seniors.

This action plan will not just help our fellow citizens, businesses and cities in five or ten years but right now. It is helping them immediately, on an emergency basis, when they are most in need. This action plan is directed first at the people who are most affected and our priorities include working people. The economic action plan was passed yesterday in the House. I rose then on the very spot where I am standing now to support this plan for our working people, families and seniors.

There is a program for people who unfortunately lose their jobs. It is employment insurance, which is very helpful in tough economic times. Our government is acting to ensure it provides additional assistance to Canadians who lose their jobs. After carrying out consultations, we extended the pilot project providing five additional weeks of benefits to all of Canada to help people who are unemployed for longer periods.

In addition to these efforts, we announced that the current employment insurance contribution rate, which is at its lowest level since 1982, will remain unchanged in 2010. This alone will put \$4.5 billion back into the pockets of our companies and working people. But that is not all.

We are also adopting measures in our economic action plan to assist the regions facing the highest unemployment, as is the case in Bas-Saint-Laurent, Côte-Nord, Centre-du-Québec, Chicoutimi-Jonquière and Trois-Rivières. We will continue the 14 best weeks program until December 2010, as well as the program for labour force re-entrants. So these are concrete, targeted measures for the regions most in need of them. This is in our economic action plan, which was adopted yesterday and which we are implementing as quickly as possible.

These are projects that make a difference in the lives of thousands of Quebec families, that increase workers' benefits by letting them qualify for the system with fewer hours. That is not all we are doing for Canadians. Other measures are being taken. We plan to help more Canadians keep working when the companies that hire them suffer temporary slowdowns. This is an essential element of our

budget. We are focusing our efforts on preserving jobs, keeping people employed, and providing training.

In addition, the work-sharing program is an existing element of the program. It allows a company experiencing a slowdown to keep these people on the job with employment insurance benefits until business picks up again.

• (1245)

Conscious of the level of uncertainty that many businesses are facing at this time of instability in global markets, our minister has today announced that, over the next two years, our government will be extending the work-sharing agreements by 14 weeks, to a maximum of 52 weeks.

Furthermore, we will be facilitating access to these agreements by making the qualifying criteria more flexible and by simplifying the process for employers. So we will be cutting the red tape. It is strangling our businesses, and we want to reduce it.

As I have mentioned, action on training is important. Skilled workers are workers who stay employed. In a society in transformation, with a plethora of new technologies, it is important that we help our workforce keep pace.

Over the next two years, we will be investing \$500 million so that long-tenured workers who lose their job can receive extended income benefits while they are in longer-term training for new employment opportunities. This investment will allow earlier access to regular EI benefits for workers who use some or all of their severance package to purchase skills upgrading for themselves.

We will increase the funding for training paid to the provinces and territories by \$1 billion over two years.

In addition, we will make another investment of \$500 million for a strategic training and transition fund to meet the needs of persons who do not qualify for the training offered through employment insurance. I remind you that we have also provided for special measures for the self-employed. We will examine in particular the improvements that can be made to maternity leave.

We shall of course continue to pay particular attention to those older workers who, as they approach a well-earned retirement, see their job disappear and their industry hard hit. Some people are having a hard time. I am thinking among others of the forestry workers in parts of Quebec. We will support them: we will be at their side to help them through. Since 2007, 4,000 Canadians have received assistance through the targeted initiative for older workers, which is an effective federal-provincial partnership. But we are going to do more, because the present situation is very demanding.

We are going to invest an additional \$20 million. We will repeat this over the next three years for this initiative, which is working well and yielding good results. We will also broaden the eligibility criteria so that larger communities with populations of up to 250,000 can benefit from it.

Societies seeking a better future must equip the next generation with the means to acquire knowledge and experience. Over the coming summers, we are going to invest an additional \$20 million to provide more work experience for students across the country.

We are putting in place nearly \$8.3 billion worth of measures. They were passed yesterday. Obviously, I supported them, as did all my colleagues on this side of the House. If we take appropriate measures to keep people employed, the crisis will have less of an effect. Even before the eye of the economic hurricane reaches our borders, we want to act as a catalyst and be ready to meet this crisis head on. Accordingly, in addition to the \$8.3 billion, we are setting up a community adjustment fund of \$1 billion for the country to help the communities affected most by the economic crisis to restructure, to take control and to move forward in order to adjust and find new opportunities.

I am pleased that the official opposition supported our economic action plan, which breathes life and hope into our communities. Unfortunately, the people moving today's motion did not support our economic action plan. The New Democrats and the Bloc opposed the measures I have just enumerated, measures targeting workers, seniors, our youth and training. We have measures that cover everyone. These are not just fancy words. We also have specific targeted measures and we want to put them in place as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, the Bloc and the New Democrats voted against these measures.

We want to help the unemployed and older workers to find new jobs. This is why we support the economic action plan and why we will continue to make real efforts for the workers and the employers of our country.

• (1250)

[English]

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the rules guiding the notional surplus in EI, \$45 billion to \$50 billion, indicate that two years of surplus should be kept and the excess drawn down through reduced premiums or improvements to the benefit plan. If anything, we have been asking for EI premiums to be reduced.

I think the member may have inadvertently misled the House. He just said that his government has frozen EI premiums, which should normally go down, and then he said that is a stimulus. If we do not decrease EI premiums, then we are taking dollars away from employees and employers and that is anti-stimulative, not stimulative. The member said it is \$4.5 billion of stimulus. I think he better explain himself, because I think he has actually flipped it on its head and has it backwards.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven Blaney: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for giving me an opportunity to explain how the measures in our economic action plan enable workers and employers to breathe more

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easily. At this point, we want to provide some oxygen to our employers who are dealing with an uncertain economic situation.

I am pleased to inform my colleague that the rate of contribution to employment insurance is at the lowest it has been since 1982 and will remain unchanged until 2010. I am also pleased to say that, by maintaining rates at this level, we will be in a position to inject \$4.5 billion. This money will remain in the pockets of employers and employees.

[English]

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would like to ask my colleague a question with regard to the two-week waiting period.

Just yesterday, 1,200 people were fired from their jobs at the Windsor assembly plant in my riding. This was a devastating blow not only to those workers but to the community, because each one of those 1,200 jobs actually created 7 other jobs.

I would like to know the benefit of making a worker wait a two-week period when bills are due on a certain date. The deadline to pay a credit card bill or make a mortgage payment, or pay university or college fees does not change. People have expenses for their children and they need to put food on the table. Why keep the two-week waiting period? Why not provide money to workers right away, especially workers in places like Windsor where it takes many weeks to get employment insurance because of the lack of support services the government has provided.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven Blaney: Madam Speaker, this allows me the opportunity to acknowledge the outstanding work of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada in ensuring that those who need their benefits receive them as quickly as possible. I can assure the member of my full cooperation as these people are forced to face such hardship, in order to ensure that they receive their benefits as soon as possible. These are benefits they are entitled to and have paid into.

I am nevertheless surprised that my colleague would ask me a question about workers. Yesterday, this same member had the chance to rise in this House to support the measure, like the one I just mentioned, through which nearly \$200 million would serve to extend work-sharing programs to keep Canadians employed. With a package of measures worth \$8.3 billion for workers before the House, when he could have stood up to support those measures, how is it that he did not do as my government colleagues did, and that he chose not to support them?

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•(1255)

[English]

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is an honour to be able to speak in the House today and address a very important topic that concerns huge numbers of Canadians because we are in the workforce, at least most desire to be. We have had relatively low unemployment over the course of a number of years. In anticipation of what lies ahead, I think our government has a very good program and approach at such a time.

The employment insurance program figures very largely in this government's economic action plan that we introduced in budget 2009. I thank the hon. member for raising the subject of the EI program for this House's discussion today.

As we all know, we are in the midst of a worldwide recession. We have said this before and it bears repeating: Canada is better prepared than almost any other country to weather that storm. Nonetheless, we will be sideswiped and we will feel the effects of it. Canadians in my constituency and in the constituencies of most members in the House are concerned about their jobs and their livelihoods.

It is our role as a federal government to help Canadians by creating as many jobs as possible and providing the financial protection to those who are at risk or who will unfortunately lose their jobs.

After an unprecedented cross-country consultation with stakeholders, individual Canadians and provincial and territorial counterparts, our government has developed a very comprehensive economic action plan to stimulate the economy and to support Canadians and their families during this period of global downturn and global economic uncertainty.

The plan was developed for Canadians in consultation with Canadians and it reflects, to remarkable degree, a consensus among those various stakeholders and stakeholder groups across the country. In our economic action plan, we are supporting Canadians by launching the Canada skills and transition strategy, which will help Canadian workers and their families through a three-pronged approach: to strengthen benefits for workers, to enhance the availability of training, and to keep the EI rates low for 2009 and 2010.

We are proposing to temporarily invest an unprecedented \$8.3 billion in the Canada skills and transition strategy—and I say that again because that is very huge, very significant, this unprecedented investment of \$8.3 billion in the Canada skills and transition strategy.

Central to that strategy is the employment insurance program. Our strategy proposes improvements to the employment insurance program that focus on meeting the greatest need right now, improving the duration of EI benefits to support those facing challenges in looking for work, and ensuring adequate support for retraining. That is the route that Canadians have asked us to take. That is the route they want us to take at this time.

Employment insurance figures largely in those consultations and in the development of our strategy for a way ahead. We looked at a number of ways that the EI program could be improved, and one of

the areas was the two-week waiting period that all EI claimants in receipt of regular and special benefits must serve at the beginning of their benefit period. I take it that the members are listening closely at this point, because I know questions have been coming up on this over the course of the morning.

Before contemplating the removal of that two-week waiting period, as has been suggested by the hon. member who proposed this, it is important to examine its purpose. The concept of the waiting period was first introduced in the founding unemployment legislation of 1940, and the two-week waiting period has been a key feature of the EI program ever since 1971. We could well liken it to the deductible portion in private insurance. This is its history.

Now let us look at its relevance for us today, at this period of time. It ensures that EI resources are focused on workers dealing with significant gaps in employment. If we removed this aspect of the EI program, claims would not be processed any more quickly. In fact, it might take longer as there would be an uptake or a significant increase in volumes that would put further pressure on our EI service standards.

Protecting the integrity of the EI program is paramount so that it is there for workers when they need it. The two-week waiting period is necessary for verifying the claims, to ensure that those who are eligible to receive EI get the benefits they deserve as quickly as possible.

•(1300)

We need also to consider that removing the two-week waiting period may not help those most in need of additional benefits. While removing the two-week waiting period would result in an additional payment of two weeks for claimants who do not use their full entitlement, it would not provide assistance to those workers who exhaust their EI benefits. It would simply start and end their benefits two weeks earlier.

Let us now look at the cost for a moment. What would it cost to eliminate the two-week waiting period? It would cost over \$1 billion annually, and implementing that costly measure would inevitably result in higher premiums for workers and for employers. At such a time in our economy, increased EI premiums are the last thing that workers and employers need. Therefore, we believe we need to have this approach, which we think much better meets the needs of Canadians.

It is interesting to note that the former Liberal minister of human resources, Jane Stewart, had this to say about the two-week waiting period:

The two week waiting period is like a deductible in an insurance program. It is there for a purpose.

That is in the *Hansard* record of June 13, 2003, and from a Liberal minister at that. Therefore, our position on the two-week waiting period is no different from the previous Liberal government's position.

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As was previously said in the House, we are backed up by Mr. David Dodge, the former Governor of the Bank of Canada. On December 18, Mr. Dodge appeared on the CTV Newsnet program, *Mike Duffy Live*. Mike is now, of course, a senator in the other place. However, on that occasion, December 18, when asked whether eliminating the two-week waiting period for EI was an expenditure worth making, Mr. Dodge responded forcefully. He said,

The answer is no. [Removing or eliminating that two-week waiting period] would probably be the worst waste of money we could make...because there's a lot of chum in the labour market, just normal chum.

Mr. Dodge said also,

That two weeks is there for a very good reason...The real issue is that some of these people are going to be off work for a rather long period of time

We agree with the comments of the former Governor of the Bank of Canada.

That is why we are proposing to extend nationally the benefits of the current five-week pilot project that until now has only been provided in certain regions with the highest unemployment rates. This extension will provide regular claimants in regions not currently receiving additional EI benefits with five extra weeks of benefits.

In addition, we propose to increase the maximum duration of EI benefits available under the EI program to 50 weeks from the current 45 weeks. That measure would provide financial support for a longer period to unemployed Canadians who would otherwise have exhausted their benefits. That amounts to a whole lot and is a significant thing for the constituents of Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, whom it is my privilege to represent. This means that with jobs perhaps being scarcer they would have more time to seek employment while still receiving EI.

In comparing the two approaches, removing the two-week waiting period versus providing extended benefits, our consultations clearly indicated that Canadians favour receiving the additional benefits.

Our proposed investments in the EI program cover a broad spectrum on both the benefits and the training side. It is an approach that we think best suits the needs of Canadians at this juncture in our economic situation and it meets the labour and economic needs of tomorrow.

Our government understands that unemployed Canadians are worried about putting food on the table and finding work to keep their homes and provide for their families. That is why, among other things, through our economic action plan we will help over 400,000 people benefit from an additional five weeks of EI benefits.

We will help 160,000 people, including long-tenured and older workers, get retrained to find a new job and put food on the table for their families.

We are making significant enhancements to the work-sharing program. In fact, today the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development announced important changes to work-sharing agreements under the EI program. We are extending the work-sharing agreements by 14 weeks to a maximum of 52 weeks and providing greater flexibility in the qualifying criteria so more companies and workers can participate.

That is the goal of these work-sharing agreements, to help more Canadians continue working while their company is experiencing a temporary downturn.

Our economic plan was built by consulting with Canadians to help Canadians through these difficult times, and as such, our economic action plan supports Canadians and strengthens benefits for the unemployed.

While the NDP members like to propose uncosted and unaffordable solutions to the current economic crisis, our government is actually getting the job done at this unique time in the country's history.

• (1305)

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Madam Speaker, I think I heard the hon. member from across the aisle say that it would cost \$1 billion a year to fund the extra two weeks. One billion dollars a year is a lot of money, but the government has stolen \$57 billion from the EI fund. The amount of \$57 billion equates to 57 years. That is a long time.

I would like to ask the hon. member how he expects families to survive that do not qualify for EI because the hours have not been reduced. They do not qualify for EI and they do not qualify for training. I would like the hon. member to tell me how these people are going to survive if they do not qualify for EI?

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Madam Speaker, I think somebody was interested in raising a point of order because of the kind of language that was used in the House. Talking about people stealing is rather unparliamentary, as the member knows. He may be new in the House, but I think he would at least be aware of that.

In response to his question, with regard to the program that we have put together in its totality in terms of the extension of the five weeks and the various other training programs that are in place, will do a good bit in terms of giving those who are unemployed the opportunity to re-enter the workforce with the training that is being made available. That is, of course, the best kind of program: to have employment so people can provide for their families and have the satisfaction and sense of dignity in which they get out on a daily basis.

In the meantime, the extension of EI benefits is a good thing and will help many unemployed people across the country, in my riding and in his riding as well.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): Without taking the member's allotted time to speak, I will clarify the rules for the offended members. On opposition days, a member of the opposition party that proposed the motion asks questions first and the member from the party who has spoken asks questions last.

I will go to the member for Scarborough—Guildwood.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Madam Speaker, this is a \$17 billion program and it generally operates in a range of about \$2 billion, and the premium is about \$100 million. Sent up is \$100 million and sent down is \$100 million.

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The government has chosen to play a little fast and loose with it by saying that it is not going to raise premiums even though the costs of the program are going up. By not raising premiums, it is passing on an advantage to Canadians that they are not being taxed more and, therefore, that is part of the stimulus package.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer has taken objection to this sleight of hand on the part of the government. I wonder whether the hon. member would be prepared to comment upon the attempt to describe this re-freeze of premiums as in fact a stimulus.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Madam Speaker, I enjoy listening to the member across the way in speeches and personal conversations. We have a certain rapport in this place. He is a credible member who works hard on behalf of his constituents. He comes up with some pretty good questions as well and I will respond to him with respect to the good question he asked.

If he would talk to, as he probably has to some degree and I would encourage him to do it again, businesses and workers in his riding about the nub of his question about whether premiums should be increased, I think he would come up with the answer that no, workers and employers do not want to have an increase in premiums at this time. It would be particularly hurtful and harmful if that were done. The government has made that choice. In effect, that is of benefit to all Canadians at this time who would be faced with this situation.

• (1310)

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): The hon. member for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles for a very brief question. He has 58 seconds.

Mr. Luc Desnoyers (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Madam Speaker, my question will be very brief. The last two Conservative speakers, once again completely out of touch with reality, did not read the motion, which is substantiated by extensive consultation and supported by over two million Canadian workers. In other words, it truly reflects what people want.

I would like to ask the member who they consulted to reach that conclusion. Or did they simply consult each other?

[English]

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Madam Speaker, I would turn the question back to the member. Who are the two million members that he refers to and what exactly did they say? Do we have a transcription?

However, we do know that in terms of the public forums that the federal government had, a broad consultation across the country, the consensus was nearly unanimous that there should not be increases of premiums, that there should be an extension at the other end. There was not the support for removing the two week waiting period.

The minister who was asked the question prior was very emphatic that there needs to be the two week waiting period and it would continue for the good of the program in the future. There has been broad consultation and the member well knows that.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Madam Speaker, it is with some mixed feelings that I rise today to speak to this issue, simply because while the opportunity is afforded all

members of Parliament to address this important issue, what we are talking about is a tragedy in the making. It is a prescription of government policy run out over years, manifesting itself in the devastation that we are seeing in homes and families across this country.

I will be splitting my time with the member for Vancouver East, Madam Speaker.

In some ways, as a representative of northwestern British Columbia in the beautiful Skeena—Bulkley Valley, we have been to some extent the canaries in the coal mine. When Canadians hear about the recession, hear about the job losses and downturns, we, unfortunately, in the northwest of British Columbia are ahead of this particular tragedy in that we have seen the loss of thousands upon thousands of jobs across the mining, forestry and fishing sectors. We have seen what the consequences are when we take out the foundations, the very pillars of an economy, and what the ripple effects can be to all sectors.

The ability of local governments to handle the infrastructure requirements, the ability of schools to stay open, the ability of churches to gather their congregations together, the very fabric of communities can be torn apart when such economic devastation is visited upon them.

I have watched the government time and again, and I heard my colleague from the government side say that Canada is well prepared, that somehow the tens of thousands of job losses, 68,000 full time job loss in January in British Columbia alone, is somehow a government claiming that everything is fine and rosy.

I understand the government's need or desire to paint a positive and perfect picture of how it has handled things, but to any economist who studies issues such as this, and national economies, knows that Canada does not tend to lead in downturns nor lead in recoveries, that the global downturn that has been happening is now fully affecting itself upon the Canadian economy. The government is pretending that the corporate tax cuts that happened were somehow buffering the Canadian economy against this.

Thankfully, we have this strong and supportive banking sector, one that the Conservatives argued for years needed to be more deregulated. They argued for years that we should allow the bank mergers and cited examples like Citibank as something that we should allow here in Canada. Allow our banks to get together to be more competitive internationally was the call, hue and cry.

In 2003, 2004 and 2005 the New Democrats stood virtually alone in this place saying this was not a good idea. This was not supportive of a sound and safe banking sector to allow the mergers to go on. We were called anti-competitive. We were called too far left on the issue and that we should allow the banks in Canada that were pleading and crying with the government and previous governments to allow them to get together and merge. Thank goodness we did not. Thank goodness the government now feels that it is worthy to take credit for allowing a more regulated banking sector, a safer banking sector that has allowed Canada to not feel the full effects by showing no interest in the government policy at all. They were interested in the opposite.

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In Skeena, in the northwest, we see time and again government skewing the numbers to fit their own purposes when it comes to employment and the unemployed. We know, time and again, when people who have paid in to an employment insurance program believing that the form they filled out every week or two weeks on their paycheque meant that they had employment insurance. When they go to the teller to find out what support they will get when they have lost their jobs, they find out that 60% of the workers in my region simply do not qualify. I am not talking 60% across the board. I am talking 60% who actually paid in to this insurance scheme who suddenly find themselves not eligible for the program.

Why is it? Does the government have a cold heart? Is the government uncaring about these things? One might suspect that. It helps the government establish numbers that it knows patently to not be true. It helps the government over-collect on employment insurance year after year and establish a slush fund that is now available to the government to spend in any way it sees fit.

It does not reduce the actual contributions from employers. We heard some strange, convoluted message from the parliamentary secretary earlier about freezing rates to employers and employees, where they are actually obligated to reduce rates at this point, and somehow then equating that to being economic stimulus, that they did not increase the penalty upon employers and employees and that will somehow derive itself to be now part of its stimulus package. What mad accounting is going on with the so-called conservative government?

• (1315)

In the northwest, they talk about the public forums and consultations. I know I might be agitating some of my Conservative colleagues who feel that this is not an important issue. At public consultations, we saw a bit of the Conservative travelling road show that went through the northwest.

I am not kidding. By some strange coincidence in the universe, some of these consultations would happen on the very night that I would be conducting community-wide consultations. We would have 80 to 120 people show up from the business community, the faith community, social justice and environment groups and general citizens. On the same day, the Conservatives would have their road show in town.

On two separate occasions, by some strange stroke of luck and coincidence, it happened on the same day or the day before. We found that two or three people had shown up. Two councillors had been phoned the day before from the local municipal council and were told that their government wanted to hear from them. They were asked if they would mind showing up for a cup of coffee. In some bewilderment, the councillors would show up and talk to the Conservative representative. That was a tick box of consultation. That was somehow seen as getting the pulse of the communities in my region.

Do not even try to pretend this is a consultation exercise where there is no public notice or actual requirement or desire on the government's part to hear from ordinary working Canadians. It is some sort of selective wandering process to say that they met with so many communities. It is false, cynical and simply not true. It goes to the very ideology of the government. Unprepared for the economic

firestorm now upon our country, the government has stepped its way into a place of denial. It has put itself into a place where everything is fine, that the people who are losing their jobs are in some other land, not Canada. The people in the northwest of British Columbia and Skeena who have been losing their jobs by the thousands are not in line with the government's message that everything is okay.

Second, they moved to anger. Just last week, we saw the Prime Minister rattling the sabre again in anger, asking for his \$3 billion blank cheque or he will force us all back to the polls. Two weeks before, he said that Canadians needed an election like a hole in the head. It is a government that has simply not gotten to the point of accepting the reality. The reality is that Canadians are losing their jobs at an unprecedented rate. The very foundations of the Canadian economy, the value-added manufacturing foundation that has built this economy for many decades, are being eroded as we speak, in part due to policies that are prescribed by the government.

We all remember that the ideology and rhetoric was that if we keep cutting corporate taxes, even for those most profitable, things will be fine. I spoke to the forestry companies in my region and asked them how the tax break was helping them out right now. They said that they were losing money. They are in the red. What does a tax break mean to companies that are going out of business? Nothing. What does it mean to the small businesses and the contractors in my region who are unable to even get to or qualify for the employment insurance program? How is the government supportive of small business when it will not even consider that?

The aspect of seasonal workers goes right across this country. I imagine that even those who are heckling right now have some seasonal workers in their constituencies. If they fall below these threshold requirements for employment insurance, which are raised year after year by the government and therefore remove more people who have in good faith and conscience paid into the employment insurance program, they cannot collect. Go to those families in their constituencies. Sit at those kitchen tables and tell them that the employment insurance program is just fine as it is and does not need to be affected at all. It is absolutely irresponsible.

The government tacks on five weeks and suggests that this is the fix when it knows that, with 60% of the people who actually paid into the program not qualifying, this five week extension does nothing for them. At the end of the day, the government simply must move past denial. It must move past its sabre-rattling, prompting an election, proposing that \$3 billion slush funds are the solution to this, and that we should simply trust them. It must move to a place of acceptance and realize that employment insurance reform is an actual part of the recovery package that this country should be considering and implementing.

The last budget that the government brought forward, supported by the so-called official opposition, does nothing to address this key factor in Canada's need to recover as an economy. The pain will be felt, not by members in this place but by those hardworking families who thought they were paying into an insurance program and were paying into nothing but a scheme.

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• (1320)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the hon. member will know that one of the elements in the government's budget is that EI premium rates will be frozen. The member will know that a previous Conservative member made an interesting argument. Everyone should understand that freezing EI rates would have no effect on stimulus. People still have the same amount of money in their pockets.

The government said that it was freezing the rates and that it should not have any effect. However, the member stood and said that the government was freezing rates and that would provide a \$4.5 billion stimulus. I do not understand that. However, we do know that we have been reducing rates each and every year for the last dozen years and the employers and employees have expected a decrease in the EI premium because there is a notional EI surplus that should go down.

If we reduce EI premium rates to workers and employers, it means that is less money out of their pockets to the government and more money for them to spend, which means that lowering the EI rate is stimulative. Freezing the rate does nothing and yet the Conservatives say that it is a stimulus.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Madam Speaker, if it is the Conservative government's intention to talk about a thing not happening somehow representing a stimulus, where Canadians will see no difference in the money in their pockets, employers will see no difference in the amount that they are meant to contribute and the non-increase in payments is somehow now meant to be added into the stimulus package, it would give one pause to question the entire notion of stimulus under the government.

What else does the government call a stimulus in its \$30 billion to \$40 billion package? If it is \$4.5 billion, that represents more than 10% of what it has offered to the country so far, which is air, which simply does not exist. It causes mistrust and Canadians are want to have concern for the government's handling of the economy at this point.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would like to clarify for the hon. member for Mississauga South and the hon. member across the way about the employment insurance premiums.

The member does make a good point. The rates have gone down in the past 12 years. We have seen employment increase all those 12 years. The reason freezing employment insurance rates is a stimulus at this point in time is because the unemployment rate is increasing, which is why it is stimulus, because rates would go up. That is why the government has taken action to freeze employment insurance rates. Does the hon. member across the way dispute that fact? Please answer the question.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Madam Speaker, under the member's calculations, if we lose more jobs we will have more stimulus. This is some sort of bizarre logic the government has when it says that because a bunch of jobs were lost it needed to freeze rates, which was a stimulus.

Should everything not be getting better? When we lose jobs, government loses revenue and families lose income. The capacity of

the Canadian economy to recover is reduced. Is the member wishing for more job losses to acquire more stimulus in subsequent budgets?

It makes no sense. Stimulus means we put money into the economy with the hopes of regenerating job growth. What we have seen from the government is a ham-fisted approach, a shotgun approach to this economy, and the effects will be known by Canadian families. The effects will also be known in this place in the following elections.

• (1325)

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Madam Speaker, I heard the hon. member say that 60% of the people who are unemployed do not qualify for EI. I would like him to tell me how this would not only affect the families that do not qualify for EI but also the municipalities where they live.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Madam Speaker, it has been very much argued that the level of government at the municipal level has the hardest time out of all three levels accomplishing what they need to accomplish for their citizens.

When we have an employment insurance program as broken as this one, when an economy faces, as many of our communities are now facing, drastic fundamental job losses, the inability for those employees, those workers, to now go out and collect EI has a ripple effect, not only within their homes but across their communities. There simply is no money in their economy and it creates a vicious cycle where the community gets poorer and poorer and it is so much more difficult to recover from that point.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to stand in the House today to follow on from my very good colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley and to hear his passion about this motion. This is a very good motion before the House today and I am proud to speak to it.

The reason the NDP put this motion before the House today, which calls for some basic reforms to our employment insurance program, is because they were not contained in the budget. We looked at that budget and expected to see an economic stimulus package that would be real for people and would deliver real assistance on the ground to people but it was not there. The badly needed reform of our EI system to help people with coverage, eligibility and training was not in the budget. We, in the NDP, put this motion front and centre in Parliament to say that this is the most basic fundamental of getting it right in terms of helping people.

This morning the NDP held its third annual International Women's Day breakfast. We had a packed house in the parliamentary restaurant, with excellent speakers. One of those speakers was Peggy Nash, the former member of Parliament for Parkdale—High Park. She spoke about what was happening to women in this country and made a very good point when she said that the strongest economic stabilizer in a recession was a sound EI system. That is the most important element that gets support and relief to people in their pocket. As my colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley pointed out, the money then goes back into the real economy, helps local businesses and supports families in need.

It is quite an outrage and a travesty that the budget, which was approved yesterday by the Conservative-Liberal alliance, contained virtually nothing on EI, except the one change in terms of extending EI for five weeks. The basic reforms needed to ensure that Canadian workers who are losing their jobs, the part-time workers who are being particularly hard hit and, in particular, women, there was nothing in the budget for them. The budget contained no substantial EI changes even though day after day the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development has faced questions in the House about how absolutely pathetic the changes are that were being made. The changes are so minimal that they will not get to the people who really need them.

I want to talk about the impact on my community of Vancouver East. It is a low income community and already statistics show that regular EI claims rose 41% in December from the previous year. In January 2009, metro Vancouver lost nearly 57,000 full-time jobs and 27,000 part-time jobs, but those are only numbers. We need to translate that into the human reality and the experience of what that means in a local community and what it means for an individual worker and his or her family. In my community there are often two parents who are working. Many families have a single parent who is working, often at multiple jobs. When we see these kinds of statistics, they do not even begin to portray the difficulty and the hardships people are now facing as a result of this recession.

It seems to me that the very foundation of responsible government would be to ensure that an employment insurance program, paid for by workers and by employers, with not a dime of government money in that program, in terms of employee and employer deductions every month, would not be allowed to fail so systematically. Today we know that only 43% of people qualify for EI and only 39% of women qualify, which means that the vast majority of people who should be eligible for employment insurance when they need it, will file a claim only to find out that they do not even qualify.

• (1330)

I find that reprehensible. It is the most tragic failure of public policy. We have seen this year after year. The over \$54 billion that was contributed by workers were literally taken by the government for other programs. The money was not used to strengthen the employment insurance program. This is the biggest ripoff of workers. We, in the NDP, feel a great sense of anger and outrage that this has taken place. It did not just begin with the current government. It began with previous governments that decided to start using these surpluses that actually belong to workers.

What could that money have been used for? For one thing, it could have been used to increase the level of eligibility, as suggested in our motion, to 60% so that at least people would be getting some modest level of income when they are unemployed.

Why would we tell people that they need to live below the poverty line, that they need to scratch day by day and week by week to put food on the table or that they need to worry about paying the rent or being evicted? That is what we are seeing with the way the program is run now.

The other important aspect is that the fund should be used to encourage training and retraining. I am sure other members find that every day people come into our constituency office and tell us that

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they have a part-time job that they will soon be losing and that they want to get better training. They want to know if they can access EI to do that. The answer is invariably no because the restrictions are so narrow that fewer and fewer people even qualify for that.

To add insult to injury, for the people who miraculously do qualify for something, when they go to apply they find out that they have a two week so-called waiting period. The processing times that used to take maybe 20 days are now taking more than a month, up to 40 days. We have had many complaints about that.

I want to relate that back to a separate issue, which is the lack of staff resources. I have heard the Minister of Human Resources stand in this House, with sort of a gleeful look on her face, and say that the government was providing wonderful service to people, but that is completely untrue.

Most of the Service Canada offices are completely overburdened. We should be thanking those people because they bear the brunt of complaints and grievances from people who know that they are not getting what they need. It is those front-line civil servants who are trying to do the best that they can but they do not have the resources they need to service people who have a legitimate claim to file and who need the money as quickly as possible.

We did not cover that in our motion today because it does not deal with any kind of legislative change. It deals with a lack of resources, which is the direct responsibility of the minister and the government who deliberately undermined the system and made it difficult for people, even if they do qualify, to get the help when they need it.

We now have an incredibly serious situation in just about every region across Canada. I just cannot believe that, as members of Parliament, we would not understand that we have it within our power to easily fix the wrongs that have been done. We easily can fix the system to make it accessible and ensure people are getting better coverage.

The motion before us today is about getting help to people in a recession: the money they deserve, the money they are owed and the money they paid into their own employment insurance fund.

We hope the motion will pass and that the government will finally acknowledge what it needs to do to be responsible and to ensure that people who are unemployed or who are losing their jobs do not get left out in limbo and need to hit the welfare lines and live in poverty. This is something that should not be allowed to happen in this country.

• (1335)

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Madam Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for speaking so passionately about unemployment insurance.

There is the question of the \$57 billion being taken from the EI fund and being put into a slush fund to be dispensed as the government sees fit. If the \$57 billion were still in the EI fund, what does my hon. colleague think we could do today to help unemployed Canadians?

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Ms. Libby Davies: Madam Speaker, I know my colleague's local community is being hit hard with unemployment. Like those of us in the NDP, he is fighting hard to ensure that fairness, equity and accessibility is put back into the system.

My colleague raised the question about the enormous surplus, which is now over \$50 billion. That surplus has developed over the years, and workers have literally been robbed of that money. On the one hand, what makes it so painful for people is they know the money they have paid into the EI fund is there and yet they cannot access it. On the other hand, the Conservative government wants to have a blank cheque for \$3 billion with no oversight. What is going on?

We have to act in a responsible way. We have to recognize the harm that has been done as a result of these decisions around EI. Workers should be paid the money they are owed. Until we do that, a lot of people will suffer.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Madam Speaker, I want to congratulate our NDP colleague on her speech. She put her finger on a number of injustices, especially toward women. I would like her to comment on certain provisions of the budget implementation bill that the Liberals supported yesterday. Under one provision of the bill, women will no longer be able to file pay equity complaints in court. Even worse, unions will no longer be able to defend them, because they would face a \$50,000 fine.

Would the member agree with me that this measure also has an impact in terms of inequity in employment insurance benefits? Because women earn less than men, their benefits will be lower, because they are calculated as a percentage of earnings.

[*English*]

Ms. Libby Davies: Madam Speaker, the hon. member has asked a very timely question, considering we are approaching International Women's Day and should be celebrating the gains women have made.

Yesterday we saw the clock literally being turned back with the passage of Bill C-10 and the budget. The hard won gains that women have made over many decades for pay equity, for the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, have now been completely sabotaged by the government.

The member is correct. We know a woman earns about 70¢ to each \$1 earned by a man. We know women's wages are lower. If they qualify for EI, and that is a big if in the first place, their benefit rates are lower too. They face barriers on two levels.

This is so patently unfair. All members of the House should feel a sense of outrage that this has been allowed to happen. We should support the motion to redress the wrongs that have taken place. We are talking about basic living standards. People are being denied a basic quality of life because of the terrible decisions that have been made around our EI system in the past decade.

● (1340)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my hon. friend from Labrador.

The NDP motion proposes certain changes to employment insurance. This is an important issue to me, because I come from a very rural region where natural resources are a priority. Natural resources are the bread and butter of many families in Madawaska—Restigouche.

Every year, people in my riding have to rely on employment insurance, not to live, but to survive.

The economic crisis we are going through is nothing new. I repeatedly tried to make the Conservative government understand that the people of Madawaska—Restigouche were facing a serious crisis. That crisis is completely destroying many industries in my riding. The Conservatives always answered that there was nothing to worry about and that the economy was in good shape.

In the most recent federal election, the Prime Minister said that Canada's economy was in good shape. The people in Madawaska—Restigouche and other parts of the country had warned the government that the crisis was real and would get worse. But the Conservatives said nothing, put their fingers in their ears and hid their heads in the sand like ostriches.

The reality is that people were already suffering even before the government finally admitted that there was an economic crisis.

The number of unemployed is increasing. The motion mentions the alarming growth in the number of unemployed Canadians. These unemployed Canadians are people.

The Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development said that the department is hiring more people, especially retirees, to process more employment insurance applications. It is shameful to hear such comments. It was like listening to the Minister of Foreign Affairs who, not long ago, explained how they were handling the huge increase in passport applications. A passport is just a document. Today, we are talking about human beings and families who are suffering every day. The only thing that the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development can say is that more people are being hired to process employment insurance applications.

Why did the Conservatives wait until it was too late to take action? Why was the government not there to prevent this from happening? Like a good father, the government is supposed to be present to ensure the welfare and future of its children.

The Conservatives told themselves that there was not a crisis. That is what they tried to make us believe for many months. They must have told themselves that it would pass without anyone noticing. Later they could have said that they were right. The government was not right.

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Today, now that the crisis is alarming, the only thing they are trying to make us believe is that they are going to deal with the increase in employment insurance applications in the same way that they dealt with the increase in passport applications. That is not how you help people. They have to ensure that there is better accessibility.

Last week, I introduced for first reading in this House, a private member's bill asking the government—I hope to have its support for this—to make parents of sick children eligible for employment insurance so that they can accompany their children who must be treated in far away hospitals. That is a great example of accessibility. That is one way to help the most vulnerable, those in greatest need, survive and to have the financial resources needed to get through these difficult moments. Whether a child is ill or a parent loses their job, these moments are equally difficult.

The NDP motion mentions the waiting period. The waiting period is definitely a crucial element when we take into consideration how long people wait to receive their first unemployment cheque.

During the two week waiting period, citizens are not able to pay their bills or living expenses. We have to think a bit further ahead and consider the current delay that exists before people get their first employment insurance cheque. This delay is absolutely unacceptable.

• (1345)

I would like the members of the government to think about that. First I would like them to really listen and think for a second about the situations that arise daily in the constituency offices, certainly in my riding and in some of my colleagues' ridings.

By the way, I would like to thank the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, my colleague and the natural resources critic, for doing such a fine job on this file and showing the Conservative government that it is not on the right track.

I would like to come back to what I was saying earlier about the waiting period, waiting for the first employment insurance cheque to arrive. People in my riding have waited 55 days for the department to decide that the information they provided in their application was complete. In the end, these same people had to wait 75 days between their last day of work and their first cheque.

That is 75 days before they receive their first cheque while no money is going into their bank accounts and they have to pay their electricity and grocery bills. Children and parents still have to keep eating to stay healthy. As I said earlier, this is not about lifestyle, but about survival. Then there is rent, mortgage and car payments.

In my rural area of Madawaska—Restigouche, working people have sent me messages and emails saying they had to give up their apartments. Where will they live? The government is telling us that even if they are not paid quickly, that is no problem: they can just become homeless. Then they have to get rid of their cars because they cannot make the payments any more. The government says no problem, people living in rural areas can use public transit. There is no problem going to work because they can use the subway or buses.

But there is a problem. When rural people live half an hour or three-quarters of an hour from their jobs, out in the middle of the

woods, they cannot use the subway or public transit. There is no way they can walk or use a bicycle. These people need their cars.

Parents have had to choose between putting food on the table for their children and families and saving the car. They made a wise decision and got rid of the car, knowing very well that there was no more work and their jobs were in jeopardy. That is the everyday reality. The NDP motion deals with some of these things, while the employment insurance reality imagined by the Conservatives is not what people experience every day.

I remember when the Liberal government introduced the best weeks concept in the 2005 budget. I had started working on this as soon as I was elected in June 2004. It was very important. Instead of penalizing people by using their final weeks on the job when they worked the fewest hours—and that is the reality in seasonal industries—they were allowed to use their best weeks. Who voted against it? The Conservatives. It is hard to believe that they will really be open to this motion, but I want to tell them that they should start being open.

In Conservative ridings, people are losing their jobs and need to survive. The Conservatives have to realize that people all over the country have to get through this crisis. Getting through this crisis requires that they demonstrate some openness when it comes to employment insurance in order to assure our future and keep the economy going.

People are waiting 75 days for their first employment insurance cheque. How can they help to keep the economy going? It is impossible to keep the economy going because people do not have any savings in their pockets or under their mattresses nowadays to meet their regular expenses.

If we want to stimulate the economy, the people waiting for their employment insurance cheques have to receive them. Why is the government unable to understand that citizens and working people need their first employment insurance cheques in a reasonable amount of time?

A 55-day wait after applying is far from reasonable. That is two months of waiting, two car payments, two mortgage payments, two rent payments, and so forth. That is the reality people experience every day and the Conservative government must finally realize it. I strongly advise the government to listen to what the hon. members in this House are saying and show more openness so that our citizens, our working people, can survive and get through this crisis.

Business of Supply

●(1350)

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Madam Speaker, I thought I heard the hon. Liberal member say that the Conservative government is burying its head in the sand. I would like to ask him where the Liberals' heads were when they voted to attack women concerning pay equity? Where were the Liberals' heads when they decided to support the Conservative attack against students? Where were the Liberals' heads when they decided to support the Conservatives at the expense of workers? How deep in the sand did the Liberals have their heads then?

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Madam Speaker, I could ask my hon. NDP colleague the same question.

In November 2005, when they decided to defeat the Liberal government and give the Conservatives the opportunity to take power, they created the prospect of our current situation, that is, seeing the elimination of women's right to pay equity and preventing the implementation of measures desperately needed in the regions. Measures for employment insurance cannot be just temporary; they must be permanent. That is the reality.

I hear the NDP members shouting their heads off in the House, but the fact is, in November 2005, they had the opportunity to make Parliament work and ensure that more and more would be given to Canadians. They decided to vote with the Conservatives instead. They gave the Conservatives power and now they are complaining. The fact is, I am in favour of the motion. They should therefore calm down and, now that I have refreshed their memories, bear in mind that they voted against us and handed power to the Conservatives.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Madam Speaker, I do not doubt the sincerity of my colleague from Madawaska—Restigouche. Knowing him, I consider his remarks very sincere. We must question the position of his party, though. I would remind him that it was not the opposition that unseated them, but the public. The public did not vote for them and brought in the Conservatives. That phase will not last long, given the way they operate.

My question is as follows. The Bloc Québécois has tabled two bills, namely Bill C-241, to remove the waiting period, and Bill C-308, to improve the system. Will the Liberals follow the same logic, support these bills and ensure that the Prime Minister does not call for a royal recommendation?

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Madam Speaker, any member of this House introducing a private member's bill wants to ensure that the government will consider it. I thank my colleague for his question, which was much more friendly than the question put to me earlier. At least he is speaking to me in a normal voice and not shouting at me as I answer. I want to congratulate and thank him.

I am having the same experience with my bill to entitle parents of children who are ill to employment insurance. For my part, and I hope to have the support of the Bloc, I hope that the government will consider my bill and do what is best for the public. The employment insurance system must have more heart. If we are to be able to help our fellow citizens, we must also ensure that both EI and the government have more heart when the time comes to make changes and improvements to the employment insurance system.

●(1355)

[English]

Mr. Mike Lake (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Madam Speaker, I have a really quick question. I want to make sure that I heard what I thought I heard. I think I heard the member say that the government is meant to be like a concerned parent looking after its children.

I would like to clarify whether the hon. member was referring to all Canadians as children. I just want to make sure that I actually heard what I thought I heard.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Madam Speaker, it is incredible to hear such childishness. I said the government had to act like a good parent. It must look after its children. The government must be a good parent and be concerned for its children. A government must look after its citizens. If the member is trying to denigrate the remarks of another member in this way, the member should be careful.

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Labrador will have four minutes to begin with and then the rest of his allotted time after question period.

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I certainly will use my six minutes after question period.

I want to thank the member for bringing forward this motion and spurring debate on what is an important program, a needed program. It is a program that helps many families, individuals and communities within our country. I also want to thank the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, who has been a strong advocate for EI reform. I also want to thank the Liberal caucus which has been supportive of EI reform not only today but in past years. From 2000 to 2005 the Liberal government made major overhauls of the EI system to help Canadians from coast to coast to coast.

Many people in my riding, which is primarily a rural riding, depend on EI to pay their bills, to send their kids to school, to heat their homes and to buy food. This is a reality in the riding of Labrador. Many people in my riding are disappointed in the Conservatives' approach to EI reform, if it can be called reform. All they have done is tacked on five weeks. Some would say that is a move in the right direction, but it does not go far enough. It does not meet the needs of Canadians who are in more trouble today than they have been in a generation.

Statements by Members

We have to remind people of the attitude of the Conservatives in the past. They called EI nothing but a welfare system. They said that EI was only a handout to people. We have to remind Canadians of what the minister said not too long ago, that the EI program was too lucrative. I think the attitude of the Conservative government permeates the fact that they have taken so little action on EI reform. Many groups and communities across the country say that EI reform is one of the best ways to stimulate the economy.

When the minister talks about EI being too lucrative, I would like her to go to the communities in Labrador where the average EI payment in many places is \$350 every two weeks. Can that be called too lucrative? Is that meeting the needs of Canadians? Not one person in this House would dare stand up and say that was too lucrative. I know hundreds of families and individuals who are in that particular situation and it is not good.

This program is an insurance program. People pay into it and they expect help when times are tough. That is why I and the Liberal Party are supporting this particular motion.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. member, but it being two o'clock, we have to move on to other items. When we resume debate on this matter, he will have a good seven minutes remaining to conclude his remarks.

It being two o'clock, we will now proceed with statements by members.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

VIOLENT CRIME

Mr. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are shocked and dismayed at the recent wave of gangster violence in British Columbia.

Previous Liberal governments all but ignored the problem of violent crime, but there is good news. Last week Canada's Minister of Justice tabled two new laws which tackle organized crime and get tough on serious drug criminals. These build on our Conservative government's Tackling Violent Crime Act, which imposed mandatory prison sentences for gun crimes and made it much tougher for repeat gun criminals to get bail.

Last week the opposition parties suddenly got religion and claimed that it wanted to get tough on crime. Sadly, these johnny-come-latelies to the crime issue talk tough at election time but then obstruct, delay, water down and even oppose our efforts to protect Canadians.

Canadians expect more from these born again crime fighters. When will Liberal and NDP MPs finally protect the victims of crime and start standing up for Canadians?

● (1400)

TED PATEY

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today in the House to pay tribute to and honour a fellow Newfoundlander, Ted Patey of Badger, who passed away on December 6, 2008. He was 66 years old.

He was known as a cheerful sports reporter across the province, who hosted a popular sports program in the 1980s for nearly 400 episodes. His most memorable event was the play-by-play commentary for the 1991-92 Herder Memorial championship hockey series that was won by his beloved Badger Bombers. In 2006, he was inducted into the Newfoundland and Labrador Hockey Hall of Fame. The same year he was awarded a lifetime achievement award from the town of Badger for his outstanding dedication, love and support of the town. Ted took great pride in his community and was always there to lend a helping hand.

In April of this year, a heritage park will be named and dedicated to his many accomplishments in the town of Badger. It will be named the Ted Patey Heritage Park.

Ted's legacy will be long remembered in his hometown of Badger. Ted Patey will be greatly missed by his family, his town, his province and his many friends.

* * *

[Translation]

LOUISE FOURTANÉ BORDONADO

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, today I want to pay tribute to an exceptional person, Louise Fourtané Bordonado. Although she is leaving active municipal politics, her hard work on numerous committees has left an indelible mark, for example on the members of the Table de concertation de condition féminine des Moulins.

In 1999 this woman of compassion who stood by her word, who encouraged women to run for office while she was vice-president of the Comité national d'action politique des femmes du Parti Québécois, decided to practise what she had been preaching and dedicated herself to the service of her fellow citizens. Her contribution will serve as an example for many amongst us.

On behalf of women from the Moulins area, I would like to thank Mrs. Bordonado for her 10 years as municipal counsellor for Mascouche and wish her the very best in her future endeavours.

* * *

[English]

STATUS OF WOMEN

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, women and men around the world are recognizing International Women's Day as a time to celebrate women's social, political and economic achievements.

Statements by Members

Sadly, women across the world still suffer extreme poverty, violence and violations of their basic human rights. In Canada, lack of attention to women's rights by successive governments has left equality rights in tatters.

The government has cut funds to Status of Women Canada and removed the word "equality" from its mandate; eliminated the court challenges program; failed to make investments in child care; failed to invest in affordable housing; failed to make employment insurance accessible to more women; failed to improve the lives of aboriginal women; and failed to address violence against women.

Disturbingly, the Conservative government is now revoking pay equity laws in Canada and removing pay equity protection under the Canadian Human Rights Act for federal employees. New Democrats will continue to fight for equality and oppose the government's agenda to turn back the clock on women's rights.

We invite all Canadians to join us in celebrating International Women's Day and to speak out on the issues that matter to all women.

* * *

DUTTON & DISTRICT LIONS CLUB

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our communities are better places because of them; projects are planned, buildings are built, parks are designed, youth are assisted and seniors are housed through them. Yes, I am speaking of service clubs.

I had the pleasure of participating in a wonderful event, the grand opening, a house warming so to speak, of Caledonia Two, a beautiful seniors housing project in friendly Dutton, Ontario. The stars of the show? Members of the Dutton & District Lions Club. With their help, this project succeeded through tough times. It was led by Clare Oldham, whose vision and drive would not let the project fail, and the committee, led by Bob Purcell, which kept the fundraising on track.

This lions club, even while working on this major project, continued its other great work in the community. At every event in the western part of Elgin, people will find hard-working lions club members on fundraising duty. I will admit to eating the occasional great burger prepared by them.

I salute the Dutton & District Lions Club. Our community is better because the lions club is part of it.

* * *

● (1405)

SPECIAL OLYMPICS WORLD WINTER GAMES

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with great pleasure that I rise in this chamber today to pay tribute to an outstanding Prince Edward Island athlete.

Stratford native Michael Morris, who lives in my riding with his mother, Judy, has just returned home from participating in the 2009 Special Olympics World Winter Games, which were held in Boise, Idaho in February, winning two bronze and a silver medal.

Michael has been skiing since he was a youngster and his list of accomplishments over the last few years would make any Olympian proud. He became involved in Special Olympics not for the competition, but for the friendship with other intellectually disabled athletes.

Michael is an inspiration to us all. I know he is proud to be a Canadian and I know how proud he is to carry the Canadian flag at the games.

Once again, I would like to pass my congratulations on to Michael Morris for his triple medal finish at the Special Olympics World Winter Games in Boise, Idaho.

* * *

CANADA POST

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise to celebrate the hard work of the 137 Canada Post employees at the postal plant on 51st Street in Saskatoon, across from my MP office. Those good workers contribute to making Canada Post one of the most trusted federal institutions in the eyes of the Canadian public. I congratulate them on their achievement over many years in making adjustments to transform and enhance the quality of service delivery.

Every day millions of Canadians rely upon Canada Post workers to help them communicate, send and receive payments, advertise and ship their products. We commend Canada Post for directly investing in the future of its employees. A new state of the art mail processing plant has been announced for the Winnipeg International Airport.

I also commend the contribution of Canada Post employees, customers and suppliers in my riding for helping the newly formed Canada Post Foundation for Mental Health reach its 2008 \$1 million fundraising goal.

It has been a long and brutal winter and so, for our postal carriers, especially my postal carrier Robert Winslow, we look forward to warmer and sunnier spring days to do their important work in connecting us across the country and around the world.

* * *

[*Translation*]

AYAAN HIRSI ALI

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Ayaan Hirsi Ali is the Somali woman who became a Dutch citizen and, following the assassination of director Theo Van Gogh, a member of the Dutch Parliament. She wrote the screenplay for the late director's film entitled *Submission*, which denounced the harm done to a woman in the name of religion. A fatwa was then issued against Ms. Hirsi Ali's life.

While in Montreal this week, she gave a lecture on multiculturalism, which has been official policy in Canada since 1982, but not in Quebec, which chose interculturalism instead. Ms. Hirsi Ali criticized multiculturalism harshly, saying that the policy exempted minorities from obligations that everyone else has. She stated that Quebec's interculturalism, which calls on immigrants to undertake a moral engagement with the Government of Quebec, is more appropriate because immigrants can acquire a better understanding of the host society's values, such as secularism and gender equality.

This government could learn a lot from Ayaan Hirsi Ali's perspective on Canadian multiculturalism.

* * *

[English]

JOHN LUNDRIGAN

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to a former member of the House, John Lundrigan, who recently passed away at the age of 70.

John served in the House for the riding of Gander—Twillingate from 1968 to 1974. He would later go on to serve in Newfoundland and Labrador's House of Assembly for the electoral district of Grand Falls—Buchans, serving as a cabinet minister in the government.

One notable story of John's time in the House has become legendary. In February 1971 John was speaking in this chamber when the then prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, made, in John's and many other's opinions, a rather unparliamentary remark. Of course Trudeau would argue he never said such naughty language, and so the fuddle duddle scandal was born.

On behalf of all of us, we give our condolences to John's family and friends. He will certainly be missed.

* * *

● (1410)

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, International Women's Day is Sunday, March 8. It is a time to celebrate the political, social and economic achievements of women past, present and future.

Indeed, women have made great strides in the past century, but as we celebrate today, we still have a fight before us. Only 21% of members of this chamber are women, women still earn only 70¢ on the dollar of what men earn for work of equal value and 80% of unpaid caregiving in our country is done by women who are continuously in and out of the work force to care for sick loved ones and to care for their children. Women are the victims of time poverty.

We have watched as the government removed equality from the mandate of the women's program, closed 12 of 16 regional offices for Status of Women and cut off at the knees funding for research and advocacy. More recent, the government launched its ideological attack on women's human rights by removing their right to pay equity.

Statements by Members

Women have a long history of coming together to fight injustices and I stand with those women here today to strive for a better future for women, for true equality.

* * *

LEADER OF THE LIBERAL PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the Liberal Party says this about expelling Newfoundland separatist-leaning Senator George Baker from caucus: "That's too ridiculous to discuss".

What is ridiculous is the fact that the leader of the Liberal Party opposite is apparently okay with a member of his caucus, the longest-serving Liberal parliamentarian, talking about forming his separatist political party and potentially seeking its leadership.

To me, as a proud nationalist, this is not only a question of leadership, but a question of principle. The Liberal leader has come back to Canada and he either cannot or will not answer a pretty basic question about whether it is appropriate for someone who condones the creation of a separatist party to be in the Liberal Party.

Will he show his true patriot love today by tossing that senator out of the Liberal Party?

* * *

BENJAMIN MIGUEL

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to honour and pay homage to a special person who recently passed away in my riding. Mr. Benjamin Miguel was a respected and much loved leader in the Filipino community. He met his end as he lived his life: with strength, courage and dignity.

As the New Democrat spokesperson for multiculturalism, Mr. Miguel's life allows us to reflect on the outstanding contributions of the Filipino community to Canadian society. This community is filled with hardworking and proud men and women, people who celebrate life and create culture.

Their courage, fortitude and dreams of building better lives for their families are an inspiration to us all. From the monthly birthday celebrations of the New Era Society to the community development of the Circulo Ilonggo Association to the charity work of Alpha Phi Omega, the Filipino community in British Columbia is active, creative and vibrant.

In Canada's multicultural fabric, the Filipino threads are woven deeply. I would like to convey our deepest sympathies to Mr. Miguel's family. May his life inspire the sons and daughters of the Filipino community and indeed all of us to honour his legacy and make him proud.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

OPPOSITION PARTIES

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Saint Boniface, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the opposition members on the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage voted against a motion condemning groups that promote violence and racism. The Liberal-NDP-Bloc coalition is still very much in effect and is protecting such groups.

The Liberals and New Democrats preferred to keep the status quo in this new coalition of intolerance, a coalition whose survival depends once again on a partner whose main objective is not to build a stronger, safer Canada. The Liberals are demonstrating that they do not care much about national unity. I would remind this House that 80% of the advertising revenue of the newspaper *Le Québécois* comes from the Bloc Québécois.

I am disappointed that the opposition members on this committee are unable to oppose these extremists and unable to defend Canada.

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STATUS OF WOMEN

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the slogan chosen this year by the Regroupement des centres de femmes du Québec for International Women's Day is "United, mobilized and moving forward", but unfortunately, in many parts of our society, women's progress is at a standstill and vigilance is still required if we are to maintain our gains.

We are still under-represented in positions of power and we hold only 13% of the positions available in the corporate boardrooms of Canada's largest 500 companies. In 2006, women earned on average \$15,000 less than men. In 2008, 58.9% of people working for minimum wage were women.

Internationally, the UN continues to criticize Canada when it comes to respect for women's rights, poverty and violence, especially against women, and aboriginal women in particular.

None of this squares very well with the policies of the Conservative government.

The Bloc Québécois would like to wish all women an International Women's Day full of promise.

* * *

• (1415)

STATUS OF WOMEN

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, March 8 is International Women's Day.

The majority of the world's poor are women. On average, women earn 40% less than men for the same work.

Throughout the world, the current economic downturn will make things worse for women because the hospitality and retail sectors, which employ primarily women, will be especially affected.

Next week I will be attending a reception held by Black Women's Civic Engagement Network to salute black women in Canada whose leadership, influence and accomplishments have paved the way to success for future generations.

As elected members of a democratic country, we have the moral obligation to achieve true gender equality throughout Canada.

* * *

[English]

LEADER OF THE LIBERAL PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I understand the Liberal leader will be launching a book called *True Patriot Love*. I would like to know if true patriot love includes having someone who supports the creation of the Bloc Newfoundland and Labrador in the Liberal Party.

Senator Baker is even taking shots at the previous Liberal government, saying the creation of his Bloc is partly the result of Paul Martin's dealings with the province.

Now some of us like to take shots at former prime ministers, but taking shots at Canadian unity cannot be tolerated, but tolerating is exactly what the Liberal leader is doing.

On issue after issue, the Liberal leader is demonstrating a profound lack of leadership. First, he was for a carbon tax, now he claims to be against. First he signed his name to the coalition. Now he claims to be against it.

Will he stand up, show some leadership and actually take a stand on an issue as important as the unity of the country?

The Speaker: Order. I invite hon. members who wish to offer their sympathies to the family of former Speaker Gilbert Parent to sign the book of condolences in room 216 until 5 p.m. today.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in the 2007 budget Parliament approved \$4.6 billion in infrastructure investment for this fiscal year ending in a matter of weeks, but we have discovered that less than \$1 billion has actually flowed.

If the Prime Minister already has \$3 billion approved and ready to go, why has he not invested? Will he get the money out the door or is he just trying to hide the size of his deficit?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Certainly, Mr. Speaker, the government is not trying to hide the state of the deficit.

The fact of the matter is, as I have said before, these are funds that we want to make available for the new programs that are coming on line. They will come on line over the next three months.

There will be all kinds of announcements across the country. The public will be of course informed as quickly as possible. I know the hon. members opposite want to pass this money and let us go on with making those positive announcements for the Canadian public.

Oral Questions

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are talking about money that will lapse if he does not spend it shortly.

There are 1,500 workers in Hamilton who have lost their jobs because the steel works are closing down. I spoke to the mayor of Hamilton this morning and he told me, "The need for speed is critical". Hamilton has a multi-million dollar water infrastructure project that is ready to go.

The Prime Minister has \$3 billion at his disposal. Why can he not give Hamilton the help it needs right now?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government is in the process of approving projects with other levels of government.

As I mentioned before, last year alone we spent three times more on infrastructure than the previous Liberal government. That amount was going to double this year even without the additional funds we are planning to spend. That is why we need passage of those funds.

The hon. member cannot have it both ways. He cannot say spend faster, but please do not let the spending get passed. Get on, pass the spending, let it happen. That is what Canadians want.

• (1420)

[Translation]

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, they have announced the spending, but they have not actually spent the money.

The Prime Minister has more than \$3 billion at his disposal. This \$3 billion was approved in the 2007 budget and he could be using it at this very moment to invest in infrastructure.

Can he tell us, once again, why he is not using this \$3 billion? Is he making Canadians wait so he can hide the size of the deficit?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we will spend more than just the money announced in past budgets. That is why we are looking for support.

[English]

I hate to use this expression, but the Leader of the Opposition really is engaged, on this entire budgetary business, in the biggest exercise of suck and blow I have ever seen in Canadian history.

He really has to make up his mind whether he is going to help us pass it quicker or try to block it. The right thing to do is obviously pass it and let it happen.

* * *

JUSTICE

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Federal Court told the government that it must take all reasonable steps to stop the execution of a Canadian citizen facing the death penalty in Montana. The court said that the government's refusal to support this Canadian citizen was a breach of duty, unlawful and invalid.

Will the Minister of Justice assure Canadians that he will not appeal this ruling and that the Conservative government will finally

stop picking and choosing which Canadians to defend and which rights it stands up for?

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), CPC): Mr. Speaker, before I answer my hon. colleague's question, I would like to remind him of the two young aboriginal men whose lives were brutally cut short by Ronald Allen Smith who marched them into a Montana forest and shot them execution style.

That said, we are currently reviewing the court's decision and it would be inappropriate to comment further.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, tragically, no capital punishment will bring these lives back.

[Translation]

My question is for the Minister of Justice. Will the government, yes or no, comply with the court's decision and uphold, in Montana as in the rest of the world and for all Canadians, the principle that society does not have the right to take away what it did not give, that being life, and which sees the death penalty as vengeance purporting to be justice?

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), CPC): Mr. Speaker, it would be nice if the opposition members showed as much compassion and concern for the lives of victims and their families as they do for those of criminals.

That said, I repeat, we are currently reviewing the court's decision and it would be inappropriate to comment further.

* * *

[Translation]

STATUS OF WOMEN

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, women's groups are at the United Nations today, protesting against the government's record on the status of women. They are there to call attention to the fact that the government's pay equity bill, which the Liberals supported, restricts women's right to receive the same pay as men for the same work.

Instead of sending his Minister of State for the Status of Women to boast about a bill everyone condemns, would the Prime Minister not do better to take a step back and introduce real pay equity legislation, modelled on Quebec's legislation?

• (1425)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada has an excellent record on pay equity, but the minister has proposed improvements to ensure that in the future, we will have pay equity decisions much faster than in the past. This is a good change, and I regret the Bloc's decision to oppose this change.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is not just the Bloc. All women's groups are opposed to this change.

Oral Questions

Quebec's pay equity legislation is proactive, whereas the federal legislation turns back the clock. For example, the federal legislation makes pay equity a right that has to be negotiated as part of the collective bargaining process, which is not the case in Quebec's legislation.

Should the Prime Minister not take advantage of International Women's Day to do his homework again and introduce a real pay equity law?

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what is happening today under the current legislation is that women's rights are being negotiated away. This proactive system will ensure that both employers and unions have an obligation to ensure that women's equity is achieved in the workplace and that exactly like in the Quebec provincial legislation, there is an independent tribunal that will look at that to ensure that women's equity is achieved.

We stand behind pay equity. We stand up for the rights of women.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, if the Conservative government had any respect for women at all, they would not have tried to hide the pay equity issue in the Budget Implementation Act. This is just a strategy for avoiding public debate on the backwardness of the Conservative way.

Does the Prime Minister realize that in passing legislation to limit the application of pay equity to employment categories that are at least 70% female, he is setting the cause of women back?

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what astounds me is why that member has not stood up before this whole issue and asked, why do women have to wait 15 or indeed 20 years in order to achieve pay equity in the workforce? That is simply not correct.

We are ensuring that women achieve pay equity on an ongoing basis, so that unions and employers cannot bargain away pay equity in the course of a collective agreement. That is why we are bringing this legislation forward and that is why that member should support this legislation.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the minister should do his homework and find out what the legislation is in Quebec.

The legislation passed with the connivance of the Liberals threatens unions with a \$50,000 fine if they encourage women to file a complaint. It forbids personal and collective grievances and makes the right to pay equity negotiable.

Will the Conservative government finally admit that it is on the wrong track here and should immediately introduce real, proactive pay equity legislation?

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, the member is twisting what the legislation says. What it means is that women are entitled to go to the independent

Public Service Labour Relations Board in order to ensure that pay equity is achieved. There can be no prosecution of an employer or of a union without the consent of that independent board.

* * *

AFGHANISTAN

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today we learned that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called for an international high level meeting to find a global consensus on the future of Afghanistan.

Could the Prime Minister tell us whether the Government of Canada would be participating in such a meeting? Given Canada's important involvement in Afghanistan, would the government consider hosting such an important event?

[*Translation*]

Will the Prime Minister accept the American government's suggestion and offer to hold this summit here in Canada?

[*English*]

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the leader of the New Democratic Party.

I did read the comments made by Secretary of State Clinton. We have no details beyond those comments. Obviously Canada would be delighted to participate in any such gathering. At the same time, as the leader of the NDP would know, I had good discussions, indepth discussions, with President Obama on this subject when he was here.

All of our NATO partners will be discussing this at the summit in April.

* * *

● (1430)

GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us hope that it can produce a comprehensive path toward peace.

[*Translation*]

In regard to the \$3 billion slush fund, the Prime Minister does not have a blank cheque just because the Liberal Party supported his government for the 62nd confidence vote in a row. It really was the 62nd in a row.

Why does the Prime Minister refuse to be transparent? Why does he want to break his own law on accountability? And why does the Prime Minister want to betray people by using the same tired old recipe—

The Speaker: The right hon. Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, quite to the contrary, this government follows accountability principles. There will be reports on the expenditures from these funds in the June report, for example, before the House.

Oral Questions

[English]

I do have to take issue with the leader of the NDP and quote what his member for Winnipeg Centre said this morning with regard to an infrastructure project in his riding, “I think all the rules should go out the window—”.

Let me assure the leader of the NDP that we will not be doing that on that project or any other project.

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the President of the Treasury Board stated in the House, in reference to the \$3 billion slush fund, and I quote, “The Auditor General is not opposed to this—”. There is only one problem: it is not true. The Auditor General confirms that a discussion took place, but her office is unequivocal that she has not approved the slush fund.

Could the Prime Minister explain why the President of the Treasury Board is misleading the House and instead of making things up about accountability, why not just make things happen on accountability?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, one minute the leader of the New Democratic Party wants every single project to come before the House of Commons for approval and then in the next minute his own member is saying he does not want any rules at all if a project is in his riding.

We will make sure there are good, broad rules that hold us accountable, not just to the Auditor General but of course to the people of Canada who want this money to flow to stimulate our economy.

* * *

AFGHANISTAN

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in the latest report on Afghanistan the government has said, “No prospects for early and meaningful reconciliation were apparent during the quarter”. We have just heard that Secretary of State Clinton has asked for an international conference.

I would like to ask the government once again, why is it refusing to appoint a special envoy to Afghanistan to make sure that the sacrifice of our troops is matched by our political efforts at finding a solution?

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I answer as I did yesterday. We do have a special envoy in Afghanistan; he is our ambassador. Our ambassador has direct access to the highest authorities of the host government.

We have a high commissioner in Pakistan.

This government has confidence in our foreign affairs professionals if the opposition does not.

[Translation]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that will not work. The situation is clear: Italy, the United States, Germany, Great Britain and France all have special envoys attempting to reach a political conclusion to the situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and the entire region.

That is why we need someone in charge who has the kind of political imagination that is clearly lacking on the other side of the House.

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can only repeat that we do have confidence in our foreign affairs professionals. We heard the answer of the Prime Minister. The Government of Canada is confident that we are well-represented in the region.

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, here are some facts about the Afghan detainees.

One, the last U.S. human rights report on Afghanistan reported that there is still torture and abuse of detainees.

Two, the UN Secretary-General report noted also that detainees continued to complain of torture.

Three, CBC reported last May that there is still torture at the National Directorate of Security—which is the secret service—detention centre.

My question is for the Prime Minister. Last May, Canadian Forces transferred 42 Afghan prisoners. Of those 42 prisoners, 10 went to the NDS detention centre. Why?

• (1435)

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), CPC): Mr. Speaker, as we know, Canada transfers Afghan prisoners to the Government of Afghanistan. We continue to work closely with that government to strengthen its capacity on the treatment of prisoners.

Since modifications were made to that process in December 2007, there have been no allegations of abuse received by the Department of Foreign Affairs.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that is a new definition of the word “pathetic”.

The government knows very well that it is against the Geneva convention to transfer Afghan prisoners to local authorities who practice torture. The Americans, the United Nations and humanitarian organizations all recognize that there is torture in Afghanistan and have all demonstrated transparency in publicly tabling their reports.

Is the Prime Minister prepared to do the same and table the uncensored reports from National Defence and Foreign Affairs on torture in Afghanistan? If not, why not?

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for his question.

I repeat: no allegations of abuse have been reported to the Minister of Foreign Affairs since December 2007.

[English]

The May 2007 agreement between Canada and Afghanistan makes explicit that Canada has full unrestricted and private access to any person transferred to an Afghan prison by the Canadian Forces.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government is using the economic crisis as a pretext for acting on its ideological bias against women. However, even during prosperous times, it shirked its responsibilities and, as a direct result, now that the crisis is hitting hardest, only 33% of unemployed women can access employment insurance.

As we celebrate International Women's Week, does the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development not think it is crucial that we improve access to employment insurance for women?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the fact is, 82% of women who contribute to employment insurance can receive it. That is the reality. We want to help everyone who needs it during these tough times. That is why, in our economic action plan, we extended the benefits period by five weeks and we are offering more training, so that people can find long term employment.

* * *

GUARANTEED INCOME SUPPLEMENT

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this government has shown very little empathy towards older workers. Despite our persistent efforts in the guaranteed income supplement file, it continues to stubbornly refuse any improvements to the system.

Knowing that older women are among the poorest people in our society, does the government plan to introduce a bill, as proposed by the Bloc Québécois, aimed at improving the legislation by increasing the guaranteed income supplement by \$110 a month and ensuring retroactive payment to the older women it has abandoned?

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has done a lot to help seniors because they are the ones who built our country.

We have already raised the age credit by \$1,000. We have another \$1,000 increase in there for them. We have provided for pension splitting. We have set up a ministry for seniors to address elder abuse because that is particularly important. We are looking at a lot of other ways in which we can help them achieve financial independence and security, including things we have already done, such as making it easier to access the GIS and increasing the amount they are eligible for.

* * *

[Translation]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Canadian and Mexican human rights organizations disapprove of the new Mexican ambassador to Canada who demonstrated a casual attitude and intolerable indifference with respect to the murder and rape of several women while he was governor of the state of Chihuahua.

How could the Minister of Foreign Affairs accept the credentials of Barrio Terrazas, when he is coming to Canada with a past that makes him unworthy of this position?

• (1440)

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for her exaggerated characterization of the question.

Mr. Barrio Terrazas' nomination by President Calderón and his confirmation by the Mexican Congress was accepted by Canada. The Prime Minister has built a strong relationship with President Calderón over the years. President Calderón is championing deep reforms of the judicial sector and human rights institutions in his country.

* * *

[Translation]

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, there have been more accusations concerning the situation of domestic workers. These women are vulnerable to blackmail, economic and sometimes sexual exploitation by their employers, who they cannot leave. These women are often isolated and in an extremely fragile state.

What is the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism waiting for to implement the Bloc proposals that will end the current requirement that forces these women to live in the employer's home?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is a very important program for those women who use it and it is also important for the employers. We have seen an increase in the number of women and men who arrive in Canada under this program.

I am aware of the concerns raised by the member. I have already asked my officials to advise me on the best way to improve the program in order to better protect the rights of these women and men.

* * *

[English]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the city of Windsor is in a crisis, and the Conservatives are clearly oblivious to the suffering of Canadians. We have just learned that 1,500 jobs have been lost at the local Chrysler plant, 1,500 more Canadians who need help.

When will the minister understand that many families live paycheque to paycheque, and agree to decrease the EI waiting times and increase the benefits for unemployed Canadians?

Oral Questions

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are very aware of the unfortunate layoffs in Windsor and Hamilton, and in my own riding of Haldimand—Norfolk over the last week, as well as so many others across the country.

That is why, in our economic action plan, we included an extension of EI regular benefits by five weeks. That is what Canadians asked us for when we consulted them prior to the budget. We have also included an expansion of the work-sharing program, which we announced today, by an additional 14 weeks, to 52 weeks a year, so that we can preserve jobs. I thank the member opposite for supporting those moves yesterday.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one cannot take that to the bank and pay April's mortgage. It is still too little and too late. There is nothing to improve real access and nothing to boost benefits next week.

The minister is out of touch with the real suffering that is going on in many of our communities in Canada. There has been an increase of over 61% in individuals collecting employment insurance in Windsor over the last year, 61%. Why is it that the minister has no real plan to deal with the thousands of newly unemployed Canadians in Windsor and throughout Canada?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I suggest that the member read what she approved yesterday, because there is a plan. It is called the economic action plan. That is what she approved yesterday in the vote on third reading. That is where we have mapped out how we will help those who have been unfortunate enough to lose their jobs through no fault of their own.

We will provide them with the economic supports of EI for a longer period of time. We will help them get the training for the skills they will need for the jobs of the future so that they can continue to look after their families in a way that will help them for a long time.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last month, 68,000 jobs were lost in British Columbia. Yesterday, Canfor cut another 700, compounding an already dire situation in B.C., which in December had a 33% increase in EI recipients, the largest in Canada.

As Canada suffers from what is clearly structural unemployment, the government merely extends EI by five weeks, and that will not cut it.

When will the government admit that its EI plan is failing to protect Canadian workers?

• (1445)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, just today we announced expansion of the work-sharing program. That is part of EI. That is to help preserve jobs by allowing companies that are facing challenges to scale back to four days a week while EI benefits kick in to take care of the employees for the fifth day.

That preserves jobs. That gives companies the chance to come back over the long period of time. We have extended those benefits

to 52 weeks and we have made it easier for more companies to qualify more quickly to help more people and to preserve more jobs.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minister's claims contradict the facts. First, the Conservatives ignore job losses, and then they fail to respond.

In B.C., laid-off workers struggle to pay their rent while the government ignores, denies and delays. Yet the minister still insists that waiting times have improved.

What would she say to my constituents who have been waiting for over 55 days for EI?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that across the country we are seeing dramatic increases in the number of claims being filed. There is no question that is very serious.

That is why, for some months now, we have been bringing back retired EI employees. We have been reclaiming employees from other departments. We are automating our systems more. We are getting the applications done more quickly.

We will continue to do that so we can get to Canadians the benefits they need and deserve as quickly as possible.

* * *

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during these challenging economic times, our government is working tirelessly to create commercial opportunities for Canadian businesses. From signing free trade agreements with Europe and the Americas to opening new trade offices in China and India, our team is working overtime.

Can the Minister of International Trade inform the House of recent initiatives to maintain our leadership in Canadian free trade?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I am pleased to announce that we have reached an agreement with the European Union on the sectors to be covered in negotiations for an economic agreement. The European Union is our second-largest trading partner. A final agreement alone could inject over \$12 billion into the Canadian economy. This is good news for Canadian companies and workers. We hope to launch official negotiations as soon as possible.

Oral Questions

[English]

AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday Chrysler announced the elimination of a production shift at the minivan plant in Windsor, effectively slashing 1,200 jobs and costing more supply jobs later on, and 15% of its Canadian workforce in total has gone.

The headlines say it all: Auto crisis deepens; more jobs slashed; beleaguered manufacturing sector. Yet the minister is on TV from Washington saying he is trying to find “a way that is helpful”. Let me help him out. The answer is a national auto strategy, something promised but never delivered.

When will the government wake up and protect the interests of Canadian auto workers?

Mr. Mike Lake (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, obviously when Canadians lose their jobs, Canadian families are affected, and our thoughts are with them.

I do want to just point out that yesterday the hon. member and I sat on a committee and listened to various witnesses talk about the most critical thing, the crucial importance of passing the budget to get the secured credit facility in place, the \$12 billion to get the receivables insurance. We heard the parts manufacturers talk about the receivables insurance being so important.

I would remind the hon. member that he actually voted against that budget. Not only did he vote against the budget, but his party delayed it at every opportunity.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the parliamentary secretary's revisionist theory. It was the Minister of Industry who said that the money for the auto sector was available in December. The contradiction is there. It is clear and present. They do not want to act, and that is the problem.

That answer is not good enough for the thousands of families in Windsor and Essex County that are relying on an auto strategy. The crisis is deepening. It is not good enough for those in Oshawa who, like GM's own auditors, are worried about the future viability. These communities will never be the same. The government is overseeing the death of the auto sector in Canada, and it is killing the communities that rely upon it.

When will the government stop playing the role of pallbearer and act to protect the interests of auto workers across this country?

• (1450)

Mr. Mike Lake (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we heard several things that were important during the committee yesterday. One of the quotes that came out of that committee was from the Canadian Automobile Dealers Association, which said:

...we've been impressed with the fact that finance is absolutely seized with trying to get this program rolling as fast as possible...they seem seized in a very real way, more than I've ever seen before out of finance officials, to try to get this BDC secured credit facility out in the marketplace.

[Translation]

ABORIGINAL WOMEN

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the rate of violence against aboriginal women is three times higher than in the general population. According to the president of Quebec Native Women, many women leave their communities to escape violent situations. They are marginalized because they are women and because they are aboriginal.

Does the government realize that it must make massive investments in housing, education and health immediately in order to improve aboriginal women's quality of life and give hope to aboriginal communities?

[English]

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the course of action plan 2009, we have invested massively in housing. We have invested massively in training and skills development for aboriginal people. In the last budget, we expanded the network of women's shelters in this country.

In the last Parliament, we also passed legislation that included all first nations on reserve under the Canadian Human Rights Act. If the member wants to help women, she can help us pass the matrimonial real property rights act, which would help every woman, child and family in this country have the protection that the rest of society takes for granted, the protection of the law, on reserve.

[Translation]

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, how many houses will be built? How many battered women's centres will be opened? How many transition houses will be built outside these communities? When will the government acknowledge that aboriginal women and their children are desperately poor, and that things are not getting better?

[English]

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, here we are again. The hon. member is right that we need to spend some more money on housing to help aboriginal people, yet at every step of the way, she and her party have tried to stop that money from going to first nations.

I do not get it. On the one hand, those members say it is time to invest, so we have record investments in aboriginal people, schools, housing, and skills and development training, but at every step of the way, the Bloc Québécois says that it is not about aboriginal people, it is about them.

* * *

CHILD CARE

Hon. Ken Dryden (York Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the assumption of the House is that members speak the truth.

Oral Questions

I assume that the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development has not been informed, for example, that child care providers in Napanee, Ontario, when asked the number of new spaces opened locally because of her taxable \$100-a-month cheques, said, “None”, when asked the number of better spaces, they said, “None”, when asked the number of parents who, with this money, have withdrawn their kids from child care because they can now afford to stay at home, they said, “None. Zero”.

Is the minister aware of just how wrong her information is?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what I reported yesterday to the hon. member was that we delivered in areas where his party when in government did not. We delivered the universal child care benefit because we believe that parents deserve choice in who raises their children.

I also reported that the provinces receive \$250 million a year from us so that they can create child care spaces, because that is their job. They have reported to us that they are creating 60,000 spaces for those parents who choose to put their children into formal day care. We encourage that, as well as the other option of staying home.

Hon. Ken Dryden (York Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, is the minister aware that when the same questions were asked of child care providers in Halifax, Dartmouth, Fredericton and Saanich on the number of new spaces, they also said, “None”? When asked the number of better spaces and the number of parents who, with this extra money, had withdrawn their kids and were now staying at home, they said, “None” and “None. Zero”.

All across the country it is the same. Is the minister aware of just how wrong her information is?

•(1455)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the hon. member realizes or is aware of just what a slur he is casting on the provinces. They are saying that they are creating these child care spaces. I believe they are doing what they said they would do and what they said they have done.

Let us look at 13 years of Liberal government. It promised time after time to create child care spaces and to support parents. What did it do over 13 years, including two years with that gentleman as the minister for the portfolio? What did it do? Nothing.

* * *

ETHICS

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, despite attempts by the Conservatives and Liberals to sweep the Cadman affair under the rug, Canadians still have a right to know what really happened. Sadly, the secret deal between the Conservatives and the Liberals appears to be an attempt to leave those questions unanswered.

Given the extremely serious allegations and the weeks of fury they caused in the House, and in the interests of full disclosure and transparency, will the Prime Minister make public all documents that would have been produced as part of the lawsuit?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for the question and I am pleased to report to the House that the matter is closed.

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): It is not closed to the public, Mr. Speaker.

Weeks before this secret settlement was reached, the Prime Minister's lawyer in the Cadman affair abruptly withdrew from the case. This led to speculation. Did he realize that the case could not be won? Was it an ethical issue? The Prime Minister will know that solicitor-client privilege does not prevent him, as the client, from explaining what happened.

Will the Prime Minister explain to Canadians the reasons that his lawyer, Mr. Rick Dearden, withdrew?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 30(5) of the House provides me with the occasion to respond to questions from members across the way, so I add to my previous answer by pointing out that the matter is closed.

* * *

SRI LANKA

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, like all Canadians, I am concerned by the ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka. This conflict has gone on for decades, and innocent civilians on both sides are bearing the cost.

Currently a large rally taking place on the front lawn of Parliament Hill features dozens of Tamil Tiger flags. Can the minister of state please inform us of Canada's position on this matter?

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am sure all Canadians share the government's revulsion at the continuing humanitarian catastrophe in Sri Lanka, a civil conflict born of a succession of repressive discriminatory Sri Lankan governments, which in turn spawned the terrorist organization known as the Tamil Tigers.

But I am sickened by the pandering of a Liberal member on the front lawn of Parliament to a flagrant display of the symbols of a listed terrorist organization. The Government of Canada would hope that all members of the House would abhor terrorism.

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FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans did make an error in judgment, but the previous minister made a critical error in fisheries conservation.

Oral Questions

Every fisherman in this country lives by a policy of licence rationalization, every fisherman, except for Tim Ryno of Inverness and Eugene Kean of Renewin in the former minister's home town. Both applied for multi-million dollar crab licences and were denied. Both fishermen took the matters to the licence appeal boards and licensing boards. They were denied and denied. But before the last election campaign, they took the matter directly to the minister. They were approved.

Will the minister now do the right thing, show some leadership, suspend the licences and explain why that matter was done the way it was?

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as you know, licensing issues are confidential.

I have great faith in my predecessor. There are a number of different issues around licences. I know he would have taken them all into account, and I will not be appealing an appeal.

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[Translation]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ms. Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we cannot recognize International Women's Day without thinking about Nathalie Morin, a Quebecker being held in Saudi Arabia against her will. For a year now, and thanks to the initiative of my colleague from La Pointe-de-l'Île, the Bloc Québécois has been calling on the government to repatriate her.

We know that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs met with Nathalie Morin, but we want to know what concrete action the government will take to quickly repatriate this woman and her children.

• (1500)

[English]

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is a very complex family dispute case with no easy solution.

During the past month, when I visited Saudi Arabia, I met with Ms. Morin and we spoke. We are bound, however, by both the Saudi laws and our own adherence to the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, under which children cannot leave without the father's permission.

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HEALTH

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a study by Health Canada found that Canadians are exposed to bisphenol A, or BPA, in 72 types of soft drinks. That represents over 84% of the market.

We know that BPA is linked to cancer and reproductive problems. It is well established that it is a dangerous chemical. What did the government do? In October 2008 it designated BPA as toxic to humans and the environment, but that is just not good enough.

Therefore today I want to ask the government this: will it take decisive action, finally, to protect the health of families and our children and ban BPA?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has a very strong record of taking action on bisphenol A, such as the study that was completed just this week.

The study concluded that there are no safety concerns with levels of BPA in canned soft drinks. In fact, an adult would have to drink over 900 cans of soft drinks a day to reach a harmful daily intake.

Canadians can expect actions from the government when it comes to their health and safety. We are world leaders on this issue, and I am proud to say that this government is taking action.

* * *

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Mr. Greg Rickford (Kenora, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Liberals and the NDP renewed their coalition with the separatist Bloc by voting down a motion at heritage committee condemning the separatists who threatened to incite violence against Quebeckers and other Canadians over the re-enactment of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham.

Could the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs please inform this House of the government's position on this matter?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first the Liberal leader said he had no problem if a member of his caucus supported Newfoundland separatism. Then yesterday Liberal MPs had the chance to condemn the racist and separatist newspaper, funded by the Bloc, that threatened violence against Quebeckers, but all Liberals recemented their coalition with the separatists and voted against condemning this extremist newspaper.

The Liberal leader should show true patriot love, condemn separatism and stand up for Canada.

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PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Mr. Bill Casey (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, when Public Works and Government Services Canada called for tenders for the refit and overhaul of submarines, the tenders came in at \$53 million and \$57 million, but when the contract was announced, it had somehow gone to \$370 million, \$313 million more than the highest tender.

I wonder if the minister could explain to the House why the contract was granted for \$370 million when the highest tender was only \$57 million.

[Translation]

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the process was clear, fair and transparent. The best bidder was awarded the contract.

Since this issue is before the courts, it would be inappropriate to comment further.

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[English]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as usual on a Thursday, I would like to ask the government House leader about his work plan for the coming week and for the week following the regular mid-March break.

In particular, the House is anxious to know when the minister will designate all three of the remaining supply days. The last supply day, as the House knows, is especially important because that will be the day upon which any interim supply bill, including the Prime Minister's request for an extraordinary \$3 billion, will be dealt with. Therefore, we would like to know when that supply bill is coming.

Of course, five sitting days before the final supply day is the date upon which the government must table its first report to Parliament accounting for its fight against the recession. That last supply day date, therefore, is an important date for the House to know.

Secondly, would the minister commit today that his government will consider fast-tracking Bill C-285 standing on the order paper in the name of the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine? The bill deals with the modernization of investigative techniques in the fight against drugs, gangs and other criminal matters. It is one of the measures specifically requested urgently by the province of British Columbia. Therefore, is the government ready to expedite that bill?

Finally, could I ask if there is general consent in the House today to fast-track the government's bills, Bill C-14 and Bill C-15, also dealing with gangs and drugs so that they both could be passed here and sent to the Senate before the end of next week? Would there be unanimous consent to move these two bills quickly? If there is, the official opposition would be prepared to move the appropriate motion right now.

• (1505)

Hon. Jay Hill (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for those questions. It just seems like every Thursday, the Thursday question becomes the Thursday questions and becomes a longer and longer list.

Yesterday, the House adopted the budget implementation bill, which is now before the Senate. I would take this opportunity to urge all senators to deal with the bill quickly so that the funds that are provided by it will begin to flow and to help our country and Canadian families weather this economic storm as quickly as possible.

Today, we are continuing debate on the opposition motion.

Points of Order

Tomorrow, we will begin debate on report stage of Bill C-2, the Canada-European free trade agreement, followed by Bill C-13, the Canada grains, and Bill C-7, marine liability.

Monday, March 9 and Tuesday, March 10 shall be allotted days. As to the last day in this cycle, I am pleased to announce that it will be sometime during that week after our constituency week when members return to their ridings.

On Wednesday, we will continue with the Canada-European free trade bill. It will either be at report stage or third reading, depending on the progress that we make tomorrow.

When the debate on Bill C-2 is complete, we will call for second reading debate on Bill C-14, the organized crime bill, and Bill C-15, the drug offensive bill.

As my hon. colleague knows, the official opposition House leader, there have been discussions with all parties and, at this point in time, despite the acceptance and, indeed, the willingness of the government to move forward with these two crime bills as expeditiously as possible, unfortunately that is not the case with all parties and therefore we will not be able to proceed as quickly as possible.

However, on behalf of all Canadians who are worried about their safety and who want to move forward with this type of legislation, I do thank the hon. member and his party, the Liberal Party, for their support to try to move these bills very quickly through the process.

Following the justice bills, we will continue with the uncompleted business schedule for tomorrow, plus the new bill that was tabled this morning, Bill C-17, An Act to recognize Beechwood Cemetery as the national cemetery of Canada. I understand there may be interest in expediting this bill. I would hope, unlike the justice bills, that perhaps we can get agreement from all four parties to move very quickly with this bill at all stages and move it through.

As to private member's Bill C-285, I am always interested in discussing ways in which we can move quickly with legislation. This government certainly is interested in getting action on behalf of Canadians as fast as possible on all legislation that will positively impact on their lives. I am always open to those types of discussions.

[Translation]

The Speaker: The member for Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour on a point of order.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I call on your good judgment and ask you to review today's question period. I feel that some language that was used violates my privileges and my rights as a member.

We sit in this House because we are people who believe in democracy and promote debate over violence. We are a group of members who want to live together in a democracy and who are neither extremists nor people who promote violence.

Business of Supply

The language I am referring to was used against me because it was used to describe a group of members, in particular the Bloc Québécois members. One member used the word “extremists” and another member used the phrase “that promote violence”.

It is understood that any member of this House who promoted violence would not belong here, because this is a place where democracy reigns and where we use debate rather than violence to advance our ideas, which, we acknowledge, are different.

I believe that this language should be condemned and that the members who used it should be asked not to use it again.

I rely on your good judgment, Mr. Speaker, and ask that you look at the transcript of question period and ensure that this language is not used again. Thank you for listening.

● (1510)

The Speaker: I will do that, but I will soon deliver a ruling on a similar point of order raised by one of the hon. member's colleagues.

The President of the Treasury Board on another point of order.

[English]

WITHDRAWAL OF COMMENT

Hon. Vic Toews (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in reviewing the blues of yesterday I noticed that the unparliamentary word I used was not unequivocally withdrawn. I would like to unequivocally withdraw the word that I used to describe the leader of the New Democratic Party. If it was not clear, I want to make it absolutely clear.

* * *

WAYS AND MEANS

NOTICE OF MOTION

Hon. Vic Toews (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 83(1) I wish to table a notice of ways and means motion to amend the Income Tax Act to introduce a tax deferral in respect of flood induced sales of livestock.

I ask that an order of the day be designated for consideration of the motion.

* * *

PRIVILEGE

ALLEGED MISLEADING INFORMATION

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege in relation to the misuse by the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans of her office to allow for the dissemination of misleading information for partisan purposes by a Conservative senator.

My privileges as an MP have been compromised by the actions of the minister, the department and a member of the other place. If there is one thing we can always be proud of in Canada, it is the impartiality of our public service. As an MP, whether in government or in opposition, I felt we could always count on that.

I would contend that the responsibility of the minister is to ensure that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans adheres to the

provisions as set out for departmental use of its media resources for departmental purposes. This has not been done in this case.

According to Treasury Board, the communications policy of the Government of Canada states:

It is the policy of the Government of Canada to:

Safeguard Canadians' trust and confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the Public Service of Canada. Canadians value an independent, professional Public Service that treats individuals with respect, fairness and integrity. The value and reputation of public institutions must be honoured. Public service managers and employees are expected to provide information services in a non-partisan fashion consistent with the principles of parliamentary democracy and ministerial responsibility...

Section 23, on advertising, states:

Institutions must not use public funds to purchase advertising in support of a political party.

The communications function, under the stewardship of heads of communications in all institutions of the Government of Canada, includes the following:

providing communications support and advice to ministers and senior officials on (non-partisan) government matters, including the preparation of speeches, news releases, briefing notes, presentations, memoranda and correspondence;

It is my contention that the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, by allowing the department's letterhead and website to be used in such a partisan attack as by someone with no affiliation with the department, has violated the provisions as outlined by Treasury Board, in terms of communications, and, in so doing, has violated my privileges as a member of Parliament by this misuse of the department for partisan purposes.

To my knowledge, Senator Manning is not a staff member of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and is not officially designated as a spokesperson for that department.

On March 3, the minister allowed her department to issue a press release by Senator Fabian Manning, in which he was designated as the Government of Canada, which contained statements that were a complete fabrication and distortion of the position of the Liberal leader and the Liberal Party.

Mr. Speaker, if you find a prima facie case, I am prepared to move the appropriate motion.

● (1515)

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for Malpeque for his diligence in checking out this matter. I will review what he had to say and possibly have an opportunity to see the sites he is complaining about and get back to the House in due course in respect of this matter.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise to speak to this motion. It is important to talk about employment insurance and the issues around it.

Business of Supply

I will be splitting the time with the member for Burnaby—New Westminster. I am very happy to do so as he has spoken many times about the issues of trade that affect our country, as well as issues related to the manufacturing and forestry sectors wherein we see a high degree of unemployment.

I want to look at this current situation through the lens of a working class town. Windsor has been very much a part of the economic hub of Ontario and Canada for many years. It has contributed to the coffers of this nation for a number of different generations, quite successfully, through hard work, innovation and as leaders in auto manufacturing. We have also participated in the tourism economy and other types of economies.

We have paid significantly into the employment insurance program over the years. It is important to note that now the tables have turned, we see a problem with the overall economy in the world. Because of that we are suffering from high unemployment. We raised the alarm bells for a long time, back in 2007 and 2008. We clearly indicated to the government that there was a problem.

Astonishingly the Prime Minister and his think tank around him, which is very much a shallow pool, denied there was a problem. We remember quite clearly that during the election the Prime Minister pontificated not only that the economy in Canada was fine and it would improve, but he also said that there would be growth and surpluses. On top of that, he suggested that during the instability with the financial markets, there would be a lot of deals to be had. He even stated that Canadian property owners would not see a depreciation of their properties. Over a number of years we had told the government and the previous administration that this would not be the case.

It is important to acknowledge that as we saw the tightening around the competitiveness issues in the automotive sector, the Canadian auto workers, the men and women who got up every day, even the non-unionized ones, did a significant job to ensure their productivity value was extremely high. In fact, it compared favourably to Japan, Germany and other nations. They provided a number of different savings prior to going into this crisis. In fact, negotiated agreements from the CAW resulted in close to \$1 billion in savings to the company.

Those are the types of things that have happened over the years, even we have had new plant procurement during these difficult times. It is interesting because there is the new SS engine, one of the bright sides of things, and hopefully that will come to fruition.

The government of the day had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, in an election period time, to come up with a low interest loan for the industry, which it would pay back. That is different than in the United States where it has opened court and has procured the plants.

What is important to note these things were negotiated from the perspective of the workers increasing productivity and reducing costs in the factories around the country. Long before it became cliché to have energy savings, I remember members of CAW Local 200, in particular, proposing savings at the plants in which they worked and these savings would be passed on to the company.

There was clearly an indication, not only in my home area, but also on the Hill between myself and the member for Windsor—Tecumseh, that there was a systemic problem coming forward. Often what has happened is the automotive sector in Windsor, when there has been a problem, has gone into the cycle a little earlier than the rest of the country and has emerged a little quicker.

What we recognized right away was that this was systemic in terms of the history. However, what happened was there would be a restructuring of the industry. This would cause an incredible amount of pain and would involve a lot of planning for a new emerging economy. It was important to see this type of diversification. However, we had a lack of government action.

Employment insurance reform is a huge part of that because it provides the stable source of income so people not only can pay their bills to protect their homes and their investments and ensure their children and their families have food on the table, but also to get the proper training necessary in a new emerging economy.

● (1520)

If we had the proper supports in our area, we would have the opportunity to be part of the wind and solar industry to ensure manufacturing would take place in the future. Ironically, we see that happening in the United States, but not here.

In Indiana a former General Motors plant was turned into a gear box manufacturing plant for wind production, and it has been very successful. We have yet to do that in Canada. A few of us have been trying to get this into place in our regions, but we have not had any support from the federal government.

The classic, ideological arguments of the day have always been if we lower corporate taxes then things will be okay. That has not worked. That has been a disaster. Three hundred thousand jobs have been lost in the last five years between the past two administrations and more people have fallen between the cracks.

As this was taking place, a lot of right wing ideologues were saying that we had to ensure that we moved up in terms of our products and services. We are already there, and I point to the tool, dye and mould making industry. Canada is the best in the world. However, we are losing out because of poor trade agreements and because of our dollar. We are losing out because of the use of oil to pad the government purse for a short period of time. People in skilled jobs were never fully utilized because of the economic conditions that really stunted the development of some of those industries, including the tool, dye and mould making industry and also auto manufacturing in its good days.

Just the other day another 1,200 jobs were lost at a Chrysler plant in Windsor. Another shift has gone down. This was an important plant because it was one of the last plants to operate on a 24 hour cycle.

People now coming off employment insurance have to dip into their savings. This is really hurtful because they have to dip into their capital assets if they cannot find a job.

Business of Supply

People do not want to keep their job. Unfortunately the government has said that because employment insurance is available, people are not motivated to get a job. That is not the case. The fact is opportunities are not available. In the last two years the unemployment rate has been around 10%. It is simply not acceptable.

We need to plug the gap immediately. For the life of me I cannot understand why someone who has paid into an insurance program cannot take advantage of it when needed. That is unacceptable. It is not right and it is backward.

The two week waiting period does not make any sense either. The people who were laid off just the other day will need funds right away. Banks will not give them a two week waiting period to pay their mortgages. Credit card companies are certainly not going to give them an extra two weeks to pay their bill. In fact, these companies have been raising interest rates and fees without many consumers even knowing.

The NDP motion would correct some of the injustices in the budget. Budget 2009 does not provide the stimulus necessary for people to protect their incomes, their homes. Nor does it provide them with an opportunity to get some training. That is why we want to see the motion pass. That is why I support it as a New Democrat.

● (1525)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, sometimes there are consequences that we just do not bargain for when we pass legislation in the House.

I see the merit in dropping the two week waiting period. I agree with that. People in my riding used to wait four or five weeks for their first cheque, but that has increased to six and sometimes seven weeks. The waiting period is getting longer as a result of the number of jobs being lost.

If the two week waiting period is dropped, we anticipate increased activity at Service Canada offices. Would one of the unintended consequences be an even greater delay in the processing of claims? Did the NDP think about that when it put this motion forward.

Mr. Brian Masse: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments of the whip of the opposition party, but I am a little surprised by those comments. Of course the gap can be filled.

I worked with HRSDC, the administration component to Jobs Canada. We should not tell people that they cannot have their two weeks because we cannot fill the bureaucratic backlog. I hope it is not the member's suggestion that people should be disentitled to two weeks of employment insurance because we cannot get our act together to get the money out the door.

Coming from a riding that has had high unemployment, we have had delays like the member has indicated. However, if we have the concentration of government services, it brings the weeks back down, but it is political will to ensure the necessary staff is available.

We have to go back to the Paul Martin administration, which cut Service Canada in HRSDC. It gutted that service and there has not been the backfill of those people. This is important because we need to have that bureaucratic structure.

What a stimulus that would be if instead of giving these large corporate tax cuts, which we continue to do right now as part of the budget bill, we provided some employment for some Canadians to clear out the backlog of employment insurance claims.

The workers are out there. Many contract positions and full-time positions could be filled. There is a mixture of those two things that could happen. I would hate to see Canadians denied two weeks of unemployment insurance because we did not have the will to hire the people to process the applications.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I want to ask my colleague about a particular piece of wonky government accounting. I am reading from the Caledon Institute report, which talks about how the government is saying that by freezing the premium rates, it is actually saying that it is creating stimulus by doing that.

I want to quote from this report:

The government did this in the 2009 Budget by freezing premium rates for the next two years. Ottawa trumpeted this unavoidable ad hoc arrangement as a \$4.5 billion 'stimulus'.

This approach opens up whole new vistas for government stimulus of the economy: Just announce a 100 percent increase in all taxes and then decide not to implement it. Voila! A \$236 billion 'stimulus' in the form of tax increases that did not occur.

What does he think of that?

● (1530)

Mr. Brian Masse: Madam Speaker, it does not make any sense and it is very frustrating to hear this type of thought process.

I can compare that to another one. I have spoken ad nauseam in the House about the Chatham Navistar plant. There was a \$300 million procurement policy for defence by the government, which it tendered out to Navistar. Navistar decided to put the plant money into Texas. We have a plant in Chatham, Ontario that could have produced the same vehicle with an \$800,000 retooling, but it is closing down.

The employment insurance bill on that, for all those laid-off and fired workers, is going to be around \$19 million. We are going to lose more money from the EI system because the government did not have the capability to say that we would have a defence procurement policy for our country, which the United States does all the time, and we respect that over here.

We are going to pay \$18 million more in employment insurance by throwing Canadian workers out the door and moving the work to Texas, giving it the reward that we would have seen for our workers here.

Business of Supply

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to rise on this NDP motion to establish a real social safety net in this country with employment insurance benefits that actually go to most of the people who lose their jobs. Right now Canadians are experiencing the worst economic climate that we have had in more than a generation, the worst since the Great Depression. What they are finding is that the employment insurance structure has been gutted. They are finding that indeed what they have been labouring under is false representation from both the former Liberal government and the current Conservative government, and that when they pay employment insurance premiums and they lose their jobs through no fault of their own, that they will be protected and their families will be protected.

Canadians are finding that is just not the case. In the budget that the Liberals helped support and got through the House this week does absolutely nothing to give an additional worker benefits. Not a single worker, who did not qualify before the budget was put up, qualifies now that the budget has gone through the House. The smoke and mirrors around adding a few extra weeks, for the minority of Canadians who qualify, does not change the fundamental problem that we have in this country: tens of thousands of families losing a breadwinner and tens of thousands of families not being able to access the employment insurance that they paid for, for years.

This is criminal. We are talking about Canadians paying into employment insurance to protect themselves and their families. Yet, with the meltdown we have seen in the softwood lumber industry as a result of the infamous softwood sellout that killed tens of thousands of jobs across the country, and continues to kill jobs across the country, the majority of softwood workers, as is the case in the majority of cases, cannot rely on employment insurance benefits.

We were talking about the shipbuilding sellout, which is the next bit of legislation that the Conservative government has brought in. The shipbuilding workers, who lose their jobs, cannot necessarily depend on having employment insurance benefits there when they need them to pay the rent, to keep a roof over their heads, and to feed their families.

In the meltdown we are seeing in the auto sector, the meltdown we are seeing in the steel sector, in all of these cases the workers cannot depend, Canadian families cannot depend, on employment insurance.

This is a crisis that the government should have responded to because the NDP certainly provided fulsome reasons why employment insurance needed to be totally reformed so that it actually provided benefits to those who lose their jobs. Yet, the Conservatives refused to do anything to treat that fundamental unfairness and the Liberals said that it was fine because they did not really care about employment insurance and they backed the Conservatives on the budget no matter how bad it was.

The results are what we see. Essentially, the victims of this false representation, that we have an employment insurance program, a social safety net in this country when clearly we do not, are the 45% of them who qualify for employment insurance, only 45% of men. It is even worse for Canadian women. Only 39% of Canadian women qualify for employment insurance.

What that means is that people who are losing their jobs across the length of breadth of this land are left with no social safety net, left with no means to feed their families, and left with no means to keep a roof over their heads.

This is purely criminal to leave Canadians to themselves when the government has so clearly taken care of bankers, corporate lawyers and big business, showering billions and billions of dollars in tax gifts to the wealthiest and most profitable companies in this country, even though they have been cutting back their workforces. There have been no conditions, no strings attached, just shovel the money off the back of a truck. Yet, for the employment insurance fund, \$57 billion was essentially taken out of that fund and is not serving to protect Canadian families. That is absolutely ludicrous.

At a time when there is no greater need for employment insurance, no greater need for benefits to support those families, \$57 billion was simply ripped off Canadian working families, taken away, given away in tax benefits to the big banks and their record profits and to oil and gas companies and their record profits. There is something fundamentally wrong with this.

● (1535)

That is why the NDP is moving this motion today. We are saying that we need to increase benefits and benefit protection, eliminate the two week waiting period, reduce the reference period so that more people can qualify, allow self-employed workers to participate in the system as well, and increase benefits to 60% of income based on the best 12 weeks. We are also saying we should encourage training and retraining. Why? Here are a couple of reasons why.

At the same time that most Canadian workers now do not qualify for employment insurance, another theft took place and that is that the benefits have been cut in half. We have already mentioned that 60% of Canadian women and 55% of Canadian men do not qualify, but for those who qualify, their benefits have fallen on average to just \$335 per week. For a family, that is below the poverty line.

Employment insurance is no longer the safety net holding families above water. It is a safety net that is badly frayed but lets most people fall through to the bottom. For the 40% of women and 45% of men that it catches, it holds them below water, below the poverty line, while they struggle to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. There is no more compelling reason than this for major employment insurance reform and yet the Conservatives and Liberals absolutely refuse to do this.

This not only benefits the families and provides the social safety net that the vast majority of Canadians want and need, it also helps their communities. For every dollar that we invest in employment insurance, we are getting a multiplier effect of about \$1.64 according to most of the studies, including the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University, which said very clearly that every \$1 of employment insurance, because it is spent locally, multiplies another \$1.64 into the community, creating more jobs.

Business of Supply

There are tens of billions of dollars that the Conservatives have thrown away irresponsibly. It was the most irresponsible use of Canadian resources possible. That tens of billions of dollars went offshore to the banking industry in the Bahamas and oil companies in Houston, Texas. The tens of billions of dollars that Conservatives love to shovel off the back of a truck to their big business colleagues did not create that multiplier effect.

The \$57 billion in employment insurance premiums should be channelled back in. For every \$1 of employment insurance premiums that, I should reiterate, have already been paid by the workers, it creates another \$1.64 in local economic stimulus. This is a no-brainer.

We in the NDP are bringing forward this motion. We are certainly hoping it will get support from all four corners of the House. I hope the Conservatives would understand that what they are doing is criminal when they refuse to allow families to get the employment insurance premiums that they have paid for and that the courts have ruled belong to the families, not to the government.

The issue is very simple. If the House adopts this motion, the government must adopt the policy and move to make those changes. There was one thing that I admired about the Conservatives when they were in opposition. I disagree with the Conservatives fundamentally on a whole range of things. A lot of their members of Parliament are nice people, but I disagree with them fundamentally on a whole range of issues. One issue we agree on is that the prime minister of whatever party should respect the will of Parliament.

If Parliament were to adopt this motion, Conservative MPs should be putting pressure on the Prime Minister and the finance minister to adopt these policies, to help Canadians, to ensure there is a social safety net in place, to ensure that Canadian families facing layoffs and the tens of thousands of Canadians who have been laid off over the last few months and have lost their jobs in the auto sector, softwood lumber, shipbuilding sector, fisheries and agriculture, that all of those individuals have employment insurance that they paid for when they need it to keep a roof over their heads and food on their plates for their children.

● (1540)

Mr. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to thank the member for his intervention. He and I both come from the same region of the country and I always enjoy listening to the king of rhetoric on the NDP side.

However, what really disturbs British Columbians and his residents from the riding of Burnaby—New Westminster is the fact that this individual, their representative, voted against things such as expanding employment insurance benefits, work-sharing opportunities by 14 weeks, opportunities for older workers, and heavy investments in training workers. That is the concern that Canadians have whenever they hear the NDP talk about this. They are voting against the very people that they claim to represent.

My question to the member is this. How does he justify to the residents of Burnaby—New Westminster his position that the expenditure of billions of dollars to assuage some of the challenges that workers face is not worth his vote and his support in this Chamber?

Mr. Peter Julian: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for Abbotsford for his compliment, but he is the emperor of spin on that one. I have not seen such fancy footwork since Elvis Presley was dancing in some of his films.

The reality is, and the member well knows this, that not a single additional Canadian has access to employment insurance. We have a fundamental reality where over 60% of women and over 55% of men do not qualify for employment insurance. As he well knows that, as a result of that bad budget, there is not a single additional Canadian that has access to employment insurance. Not a single Canadian gets above the poverty line. All that this government has done is extend the benefits by a few weeks for the lucky 45% at most who actually qualify now. They get a few more weeks before they have to worry about the roof over their heads and the food on the plates for their children.

It was very fancy footwork. I admire the member for Abbotsford, but it does not change the fundamental fact that this budget betrayed so many Canadians who are losing their jobs now. Not a single additional Canadian qualified for EI as a result of this budget's betrayal of Canadians' interests.

Mr. Ed Fast: Madam Speaker, I certainly enjoy his diatribes from time to time in the House. However, I must say that I am still concerned about the fact that he has not actually answered my question. I asked him a very simple question. How does he defend voting against all of these initiatives that we have included in our budget to address the needs of workers who are losing their jobs because of this world economic crisis?

That is a question he really must answer. I think his residents of Burnaby—New Westminster are demanding an answer to that question because he is their representative.

● (1545)

Mr. Peter Julian: Madam Speaker, as the member well knows, in Burnaby—New Westminster, like everywhere else in Canada, people are waking up to the fact that they do not qualify for EI. Residents of Burnaby—New Westminster are in my office right now, as they are everyday. We are getting new cases of people who suddenly realize that they have been laid off their jobs and they have no access to EI.

That is the reality we are facing in Burnaby—New Westminster, like his constituents in Abbotsford. I am quite sure that if I ask the member to talk about the casework that is in Abbotsford, he would admit that he has people coming into his office now who do not qualify for EI and have been laid off.

Conservatives need to represent their constituents. New Democrats are. We are responding to our constituents. We know that there is a crisis in employment insurance and I would hope that the member for Abbotsford would respond to the constituents there who have clearly said they cannot believe it. They have been laid off from their jobs after paying for years into employment insurance and they do not get a dime now. There is no support. They are trying to put food on the table for their children. They are trying to keep a roof over their heads and the government has betrayed them. The Conservatives and the Liberals before them have taken all this money, \$57 billion over years, and now there is not a cent of employment insurance to protect them and their families.

Business of Supply

I am hoping Conservatives will vote for this motion and support their constituents in their ridings across the country who are facing exactly the same betrayal.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Niagara West—Glanbrook.

I welcome this opportunity to speak to the motion by the member for Hamilton Mountain. I can assure the hon. member that we are aware of the gravity of the economic recession and its effects on Canadian workers. As we have already stated in this place, our government is very concerned with helping those who are worried or having trouble making ends meet. We recognize that many workers are worried about keeping their jobs. We understand that hard-working Canadians are worried about being able to make their mortgage payments. We know that many are worried about being able to take care of their families. It is during these difficult times that Canadians need to know that their government is listening to them and that we have an action plan that will help them.

As the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development previously said, through our economic action plan we will help those facing unemployment. We will protect jobs. We will invest in training and skills development.

To help cushion the impact of these difficult economic times, our government is delivering significant improvements to employment insurance that focus on where the need is greatest right now. Our government's priority is to help Canadians participate in the labour market by investing in skills upgrading and injecting a significant economic stimulus into the economy.

We are doing just that through Canada's economic action plan. As part of this plan we are proposing to invest an unprecedented \$8.3 billion in the Canada skills and transition strategy. With this strategy we are heavily investing in bolstering EI benefits and investing in skills training.

Before putting our proposals forward in our economic action plan, we consulted widely with Canadians. We listened to their concerns about the EI program and we responded.

Among other things, we are expanding the benefits of the current extended benefits pilot project across Canada. By doing so, claimants across the country in regions not currently receiving additional EI benefits would receive an additional five weeks of extended regular benefits. These additional weeks of benefits would be the same as those that claimants in the pilot project are now receiving and will continue to receive. Until now this pilot project has been available only in regions with the highest unemployment rate.

As well, we are increasing the maximum duration of benefits available under the EI program by five weeks, raising it from 45 to 50 weeks. This means that unemployed Canadians who would otherwise have exhausted their benefits will receive financial support for a longer period of time. This change is estimated to help some 400,000 employment insurance claimants in the first year alone.

This measure will provide financial support for a longer period to unemployed Canadians who would otherwise have exhausted their benefits. This means unemployed workers will have more time to seek employment while still receiving employment insurance.

This is very important and a point I cannot stress enough. Exhaustion of employment insurance benefits is tough on a family. Canadians who are unemployed for extended periods will have more time to find work under our plan.

I would also point out that this proposed measure would be in addition to the automatic adjustments in the EI program that respond quickly to changes in economic conditions. This allows for significant flexibility. Through the variable entrance requirement, the current EI program has this built-in flexibility specifically designed to respond automatically to changes in local labour markets. The number of hours required to access employment insurance ease and the duration of benefits increases as the unemployment rate rises.

To be more specific, eligibility for and duration of employment insurance benefits are based on the number of insured hours worked and on the unemployment rate in the employment insurance economic region in which the individual lives, not in the province or territory.

• (1550)

This ensures that areas facing higher unemployment rates have lower entrance requirements and a longer duration of benefits, and that support flows to regions and communities that are in the most need. It is also important to note that these requirements are adjusted on a monthly basis to reflect the latest regional unemployment rates.

The recent slowdown in the economy has revealed the efficiency of the current EI system in responding to the needs of workers. Since October 2008, 19 regions have seen their entrance requirements decrease and their benefit duration increase.

In the opposition's proposal to eliminate the two week waiting period for employment insurance, I would like to cite what Mr. David Dodge, the former governor of the Bank of Canada, said on December 18 when he appeared on the CTV Newsnet program, *Mike Duffy Live*. When asked whether eliminating the two week waiting period for employment insurance was an expenditure worth making, Mr. Dodge responded without hesitation. He said:

The answer is no. That would be probably the worst waste of money we could make...because there's a lot of churn in the labour market, just normal churn.

Mr. Dodge also said:

That two weeks is there for a very good reason...The real issue is that some of these people are going to be off work for a rather long period of time.

We agree with the comments made by the former governor of the Bank of Canada. The fact is that during these uncertain times, some people may be off work for longer periods of time. That is where employment insurance help needs to be targeted, and that is where we have targeted it.

I would remind the House that we have not hesitated to test new approaches and to make changes to the employment insurance program when they are proven to be warranted. We are currently continuing three pilot projects to assess the labour market impacts and effectiveness of new approaches that are designed to assist the unemployed.

Business of Supply

With the proposals under our economic action plan, there has never been such a concerted effort to reach out and help Canadians. Our plan looks not only at the benefit side of the employment insurance program, but also the training side. We are proposing a number of measures that will help Canadians get the training they need to prepare for the jobs of the future.

We are proposing to increase funding for training delivered through the employment insurance program by \$1 billion over the next two years. This can be implemented immediately through the existing labour market development agreements with the provinces and territories.

Our plan also includes proposals to assist older workers. It also helps workers who have been in the same or similar job for a long time and are laid off to make the adjustments necessary to remain active in the workforce. We will work with our partners to ensure that these measures benefit the greatest number of Canadians. In addition to extending benefits and promoting training, we are also proposing to stimulate the economy and assist workers and employers by maintaining employment insurance rates for 2010 at the 2009 levels.

Prior to introducing our economic action plan, we held the most extensive consultation in history. Through these consultations we heard what Canadians want. Through our economic action plan, we are delivering for Canadians in need. In fact, today the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development announced an extension of work sharing agreements by 14 weeks to a maximum of 52 weeks. She also announced greater flexibility in the qualifying criteria in order to increase access for employers and workers.

In summary, the minister has travelled across the country, she has consulted with Canadians, and she has put forward a plan that protects workers and will get them back into the workforce.

•(1555)

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I listened intently to the hon. member talk about employment insurance. I have a couple of questions for him.

I would like to go back to the two week waiting period. With all due respect to the former governor of the Bank of Canada I do not think he has a true appreciation for the employment insurance program, or for when someone gets laid off and has to feed his or her family and pay the rent. I do not think he will experience that.

I would like the member to rethink his position on the two week waiting period. It is essential that we get this money into people's hands. Not only is there the two week waiting period, but how does he explain the two month waiting period for benefits in many cases? Does he believe his minister's own comments that the EI system is too lucrative?

Mr. Ben Lobb: Madam Speaker, the hon. member and I had a nice discussion yesterday. He told me that his home town is Wesleyville. I have friends from Wesleyville, so that was nice to hear.

To try to answer his question, I would like to point out what a previous member of his party, much before his time and my time in this place, the Hon. Jane Stewart, had to say about the two week waiting period. This is from *Hansard*:

The two week waiting period is like a deductible in an insurance program. It is there for a purpose.

Further, for people who have lost their jobs and are on employment insurance, we have extended five weeks on the back end in order to help them.

In addition, I would like to point out the great work that the people at Service Canada do to try to expedite all claims and all cases. Service Canada has hired additional staff and has recalled recent retirees to staff its call centres to try and expedite the claims as fast as possible.

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Madam Speaker, seven out of ten unemployed women would not qualify for employment insurance. The average benefit that women on employment insurance receive is less than \$300 a week. Also, those who do qualify do not qualify for too many weeks and as a result, soon end up on the welfare rolls. The City of Toronto, for example, ends up having to add an extra \$38 million in municipal property taxes because it anticipates that there will be at least 20,000 more people on welfare, bringing the total number of people on welfare this year close to 100,000, and that is the optimistic figure.

What could the member possibly say to an unemployed woman who is getting less than \$300 a week? How could anyone survive on such a low income? What does he say to the seven out of ten unemployed women who have contributed to the program all their working lives and will not be able to get any of that money back?

•(1600)

Mr. Ben Lobb: Madam Speaker, I would like to point out to the hon. member that the minister travelled across the country as part of our consultative process in putting together the budget, Canada's economic action plan. Before those members actually read the budget, the NDP said it would vote against the budget and against the over \$8 billion that is invested into this.

What is truly unfortunate is her party's record when dealing with people who are on employment insurance. The NDP voted against all the measures in the economic action plan, which means the member is against 400,000 unemployed Canadians receiving five additional weeks of benefits. The NDP has also voted against helping to fund 50,000 unemployed Canadians who normally do not qualify for EI benefits to get the training and skills they need to find a new job and provide for their families in the future. The NDP also voted against helping 100,000 people get additional funding and training to find new jobs and put food on the table for their families.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): Order.

It is my duty, pursuant to Standing Order 38, to inform the House that the question to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment is as follows: the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra, Infrastructure.

Business of Supply

[English]

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Madam Speaker, I stand today to speak to the motion presented by the member for Hamilton Mountain. I realize that the member has good intentions but we disagree in terms of the methodology in the way in which we would handle unemployment.

I will speak to that today in terms of what our government is doing to respond to the challenging times that we have in the economy. I am sure every member of the House is aware of the effects the economy is having on their constituents. I do not think it matters where one is living, whether it is in a large city or in an isolated community, these are challenging times. People are losing their jobs there are threats of job losses. It is a stressful time. Not only does this hurt the employees but it hurts companies.

As an employer myself over the years, one builds a business by looking at training and ensuring that our workforce is valuable and skilled. However, when there is an economic downturn, this issue cannot only be a challenge in the short term but can end up being a long term one if employees go out to find other work.

Meeting payrolls and meeting commitments for payrolls sometimes can be a challenge. There were times when I did not have enough revenue in my business and I had to dip into, not only savings but into personal credit to ensure my employees were paid. It then becomes more difficult if the situation does not turn around and either the sales or the economy does not pick up.

When it comes to difficult times and the decision to lay off people in the workforce, it can be very difficult. The key words are temporary and time. Sometimes the issue is temporary and sometimes the solution is a time factor. I would suggest that the solution to such issues before employees reach the crisis point are sometimes dealt with before layoffs are inevitable.

This government has a program that helps companies face temporary downturns and businesses can avoid layoffs. This program is called work sharing. It offers income support under the employment insurance program to workers willing to work reduced work weeks while the company undergoes a recovery. This program offers a short term, mutually beneficial solution for both the employer and the employee with long term benefits. Under the work sharing program, employers can keep their workers and avoid the cost of trying to rehire workers and any retraining when they recover from temporary situations.

We all understand the costs involved, not only for the employee but the employer in terms of trying to get that individual up to a trained status and the employees are able to continue working and earning much needed income that they need to provide for their families.

Work sharing is a three party agreement between employers, employees, HRSDC and Service Canada. The program has some conditions, such as an employer being in business for at least two years and the presence of a detailed recovery plan for the business. For example, a company needs to show how it expects to return to normal production schedules at the end of a work sharing agreement.

This agreement has been in existence for a while and many organizations across the country have benefited from this arrangement so far.

However, with an economic downturn and the threat of job losses as it stands, this program is needed now more than ever. This is where Canada's new economic action plan comes into focus.

We recognize that our country is being impacted by a global recession, a recession that has not only impacted us here in Canada, but in the United States and across the world.

That is why, following through Canada's economic action plan, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development announced today that the government has extended work sharing agreements by 14 weeks to a maximum of 52 weeks. The minister has also announced increased access to work sharing through greater flexibility in a qualifying criteria.

Our goal is to have as many Canadians working as possible while companies recover from a temporary slowdown. This initiative could cost an estimated \$200 million over two years and will minimize the financial impact of the economic downturn by helping companies avoid layoffs while their industry recovers.

I want to mention a few other details about the work sharing initiative. Permanent full-time or part-time employees of a company are eligible to participate and to receive work sharing benefits but workers must be eligible to receive regular EI benefits. They do not need to serve a two week waiting period. The employer sets up the scheduled work hours. It also notifies Service Canada of any changes in the working hours and the number of employees on work sharing.

● (1605)

Workers participating under a work sharing agreement do not lose their rights to regular EI benefits if they happen to be laid off after the agreement ends.

I will provide a case example of how such an agreement would work. I will call our hypothetical worker Lisa. Lisa has been working as a technician for the last 15 years at a manufacturing plant in southern Ontario. The plant makes automated systems for new trucks. The plant recently had to cut back production due to the economic downturn that has hit the automotive sector in particular.

In order to retain skilled workers and avoid a temporary layoff, Lisa's employers agreed to participate in a Service Canada work sharing program while the plant restructures. Lisa and her co-workers have been able to work three days a week in their regular jobs while collecting EI for the remainder of the week. This agreement could last 52 weeks while the company recovers.

Business of Supply

By keeping Canadians working, our government hopes to diminish the impact of recent economic events. Of course, work sharing is not all that our economic plan offers. Our government is also investing an unprecedented \$8.3 billion in the Canada skills and transition strategy to support workers and their families, including measures for income support and skills and training.

We are proposing targeted actions that will provide an immediate stimulus, promote long-term growth and, most important, help Canadians who are unemployed or on the verge of unemployment cope with the economic downturn.

When Canadians lose their job or are at risk of being unemployed, they need to know that the Government of Canada is working hard to help them recover. They need to know that the government is there to protect them and their families. Employment insurance is the first line of defence.

On the EI benefit side, we are proposing to extend the duration of benefits nationally to match the current five week pilot project. Our idea is to build upon experience with pilot projects that provide additional benefits in regions of high unemployment.

By extending the maximum EI benefits by five weeks to all regions of Canada, about 400,000 unemployed Canadians could benefit. We also know that certain industries are being hit hard as the recession deepens. Workers who have been employed for most of their lives at a particular company find it hard to adjust if they are laid off. That is why our government proposes to give these workers more time to get the training they need and more time to find the right job.

This government plans to invest an estimated \$500 million over two years to extend income benefits for long-tenured workers who are taking part in longer term training. We are also proposing to allow earlier access to EI for regular income benefits for workers purchasing their own training using all or part of the earnings resulting from a layoff, such as severance pay. About 40,000 workers could benefit from this initiative.

While there is a clear need to address this economic crisis now, we are also looking at setting the stage for our nation's future. The economy will recover and we want Canada to come out stronger than ever. We need to help workers access valuable skills that will help them find good jobs now and maintain those jobs for a prosperous future.

As part of the Canada skills and transition strategy, we propose to increase funding to the provinces and territories by \$1 billion under existing labour market agreements. This should help an additional 100,000 EI eligible clients gain access to the skills and training they need to find opportunities in today's changing economy.

In addition, our new strategic training and transition fund will provide \$500 million over two years to support the training needs of workers who do not qualify for EI training.

Finally, we are increasing the budget for the targeted initiative for older workers program by \$60 million over the next three years. It will also be expanded so that communities with a population of less than a quarter of a million will now be eligible.

In conclusion, our government has proposed targeted actions that provide immediate stimulus and help unemployed Canadians cope with the economic downturn now, with our future in mind. These actions promote long-term growth by preparing workers for a better tomorrow.

Our economic action plan was built by consulting with Canadians to help them get through these difficult times.

• (1610)

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Madam Speaker, I enjoyed the hon. member's speech but I must admit that there is a strong difference between the government's spin on this issue and reality.

As we know, over 60% of women, people who are paying into the employment insurance fund, do not qualify for employment insurance, and 55% of men do not qualify for employment insurance. Those who do qualify get below poverty levels of benefits, which essentially means that at the worst possible time for them, when they are the most vulnerable, most Canadians do not qualify and those who do basically are held under water, struggling to make ends meet while they do not receive the supports they paid for.

Fifty-seven billion dollars was paid into the fund and a few hundred million dollars are being added in this budget. Is this not like mugging someone, taking everything out of his or her wallet and then throwing a loonie back for bus fare?

Mr. Dean Allison: Madam Speaker, I enjoy working with the member in the trade committee, and he is no less animated there, I can assure the House.

It boils down to a difference in philosophy in terms of how we look at it, which is why we here debating this measure and why, as a government, we talked to people. We asked them what they wanted and what they were looking for. They talked about eliminating the two week waiting period. They realized that it was important to ensure people had more time in the end, which is why we extended EI by five weeks. We think that is important. We have also committed an unprecedented amount of money for training and for helping people to find new skills. All these things will make a huge difference, not only for the jobs of today but as we look forward to the jobs of the future.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, notwithstanding the fact that I think Heather Carter would be an outstanding member of Parliament for Niagara West—Glanbrook, he is an outstanding chair of the HR committee, an exemplary chair who has shown that committees can work, and he is a gentleman.

Business of Supply

There has been a lot of discussion recently about the late payments of EI, of EI not being processed very quickly. An editorial in the *Halifax Herald* this week stated that the EI backlog needed a fast fix. The Leader of the Opposition stated that late EI payments to Atlantic Canadians was unacceptable.

I want to ask the hon. member if he would use his considerable influence on that party. If he would agree with me that there is an issue of wait times for EI, would he take it upon himself to have a chat with the minister to see if she could help to get that fixed?

• (1615)

Mr. Dean Allison: Madam Speaker, this is a concern that has been raised in the House and I know the minister has committed additional resources. As has been mentioned by previous colleagues, we have people coming in from retirement, people working overtime and people who are putting in all the extra hours they can to get these claims processed as quickly and as efficiently as possible. We will continue to add the resources we need until we can get these claims dealt with in a timely fashion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Carrier (Alfred-Pellan, BQ): Madam Speaker, I listened carefully to the speech given by my hon. colleague from Niagara West—Glanbrook.

I agree that it is important to stimulate the economy in these tough times, but I think it is also important to take care of the workers who are losing their jobs.

He said the government knows this, but the only significant measure in this budget helps only a tiny minority of workers who are already receiving employment insurance. The Conservatives want them to receive benefits over a longer period, but they are completely ignoring those who should be receiving EI.

I would like to know his thoughts on this.

[*English*]

Mr. Dean Allison: Madam Speaker, as we talked to people across the country, trying to come up with what was needed, extending benefits was one of the things. However, by no means is that the only measure the government is looking at.

We have committed billions of dollars for training and retraining. We realize that not only is it important to have economic benefits through EI, but we also believe that people should be retrained so that as jobs change in this economy they will have the skills they need as we move forward into the new millennium.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway.

Let me thank the hon. member for Niagara West—Glanbrook for his comments earlier. My party on this side of the House and I agree with one of the comments he made during his speech. We want to see those folks who are unemployed today back at work. I think we are unequivocal about that as New Democrats. We are interested in making sure that people who are unemployed are able to return to work at the earliest opportunity to support their families. That is what we ultimately want to see. So I join with my colleague for Niagara West—Glanbrook when I say, yes, indeed, we want to see them go back to work.

However, let me make comments around this about his colleague who had made suggestions about the variability of the employment insurance program in the sense that, as unemployment goes up, the benefits go up, and one gets a longer period of benefits but not actually more money. One would hope that would be the truth. One would hate to think one gets less benefits in an area of extremely high unemployment.

That is not how the system used to work. Years ago, the system was level across the country, for all intents and purposes. When a worker got laid off and had paid into the insurance program, that worker was entitled to collect from that insurance program, because it was an insurance program.

To extrapolate to the end of the logic of that hon. member's suggestion, it would seem that if someone paid his or her car insurance at one end of the country where there were fewer traffic accidents, that person would get less money for the car in the case of a car crash than someone at the other end of the country where there were more accidents, who would get more money. That is not why we pay insurance.

I think the government has lost track of what this program truly is. It is an employment insurance program. It is not a tax paid to the government through income taxes. It is a tax, or at least an insurance premium, paid by employers and employees to insure employees against being unemployed. So one would suggest that the nature of the name is to say employees should get their benefits when indeed they become unemployed.

This is not new. The changes to employment insurance have been happening for over 10 years. In fact, they go back about 15 years. With those changes we saw an absolute treasure trove of money accumulated under both governments to the tune of almost \$54 billion. Some would say \$57 billion, but when we start talking about billions of dollars, whether it is \$54 billion or \$57 billion, it is a lot of money.

The people who did not see that money were the unemployed. There was no increase in benefits until the year before last. There was no increase in the number of weeks. In fact, we saw a decrease in the number of weeks over those years. Very few programs were introduced during that period as pilot programs.

One of the few introduced was in regard to maternity benefits, when we finally extended those to 50 weeks. It is a good program indeed, but far short of what it should be and what it is around this world in developed countries.

What we saw was the hoarding of money, taken by the Liberal and Conservative governments and put into general revenue, and then spent. The whole idea of collecting that money was to wait for the time it was needed, which is now. Of course, now that it is needed, the cupboard is bare and we cannot do things such as make sure that there are more people qualifying for employment insurance at this moment in time when they are in desperate need of it.

Business of Supply

Those are the forgotten ones in the unemployment rate because they do not come up as a statistic. However, as my hon. colleague said earlier, if one goes to the social assistance offices in the major cities and small towns throughout this country, they can tell you the statistics, because when people fails to qualify for employment insurance benefits, they end up on social assistance somewhere in this country.

According to all experts, when one ends up in that system, it is the hardest place to remove oneself from. Why would we not have developed a system? Indeed, we have a system. Why not apply the system to ensure that those folks do not end up in that trap from which they may never return? It seems to me that since we collected their money to make sure they were being protected, the least we should have done for them was to protect them. However, that seems not to have been the case over the last number of years.

Let me draw some attention to a few things that I do not think I have heard here today, and perhaps not even earlier in some of the debates on employment insurance.

• (1620)

There is another group of workers who do not receive the same type of protection as the others. They are called “new entrants” under the regulations. A new entrant is a worker who went to work, albeit maybe a young person, or it may not be a person who is so young, because it may have been someone who entered the workforce for the first time after a long period of doing something else, whatever that happened to be in that person's life. They have to serve almost twice the number of hours as anyone else in the same region—not across the country—to collect employment insurance.

In my case, my wife and I have three lovely children who are young adults today. We have twins. Just imagine if one twin had been working for the last five years and the other twin had not, and they both worked at the same place but one was a new entrant and one was not. If both were to get laid off on the same day, one would get employment insurance and one would not.

One wonders why that sort of system exists today. We cannot imagine doing that in other forms of discrimination against folks, whether it be gender specific, whether it be age specific, yet we do it to those who faithfully paid their premium, but because they are new entrants we disqualify them. That is patently unfair.

When we look at stimulus in the economy, we talk about “shovel ready”. Shovel ready takes a bit of time. Don Drummond, a renowned economist in this country, says, pure and simple, that if we waive the two-week waiting period and pay immediately, that is one of the fastest ways to stimulate this economy.

It seems to me we ought to have done that. It seems to me that is a way to get money into people's pockets who paid for the insurance in the first place and who ultimately say it is their money and deserves to come back to them in a time of need. We ought to carry on with that.

It seems to me that the opportunity was here and was lost in the budget. Now the opportunity has come back to this place, where all of us can say we can correct it. We can take this opportunity to make sure that those who are suffering get the protection they are entitled

to, make sure they indeed get the rights and benefits they are entitled to and paid for.

That is all they are asking. They are not asking for anything extra. They are simply saying, “I paid for this. It is my insurance plan. I paid the premium, and now I am laid off. All I am asking from government is, just simply give me my money back. That seems fair, at least until I get back on my feet and get back to work.”

As I said at the beginning, that is really what those who are unemployed want to do. Quite often I have heard the comments from across the way and I read the article that suggested the government does not want to be too lucrative with the system because people will stay on it for a long period of time.

The only reason they are on that system is because they had a job. They may have had many jobs, because lots of hours are needed to actually get on the system in the first place. People have to be working. These are not folks who were not working; they were. Clearly they want to get back to that place, to make sure they are working again. That is what they really need.

Let me talk a little bit about the wait times to get a claim approved. The previous Liberal government introduced, and this government has continued, this whole sense of computerizing the system and making it better. The reverse has happened. It is not just a question of more people applying. It is taking longer to apply for a claim, going back a number of years to when going to a computer was introduced.

What we have seen across this country, and I know in my riding and from my personal experience of being an unemployment insurance representative for many years, is that they have depopulated the offices of HRSDC. What has ultimately happened is that the service that folks really need today is not available to them because there are not enough people. The minister, by her own admission today, is saying her department is going out to bring back the folks who retired.

From my own experience in working with those folks in those offices in the Niagara region, the majority of them retired early because of the workload they had in the first place. So just to get them back to where they were has them overloaded, never mind the number of people who have gone on employment insurance in the last little while or who are applying currently. They do not have anywhere near enough people, even if they brought everyone back who had retired. They will not have enough people in the office.

What they have done is basically put people in front a kiosk and said to them, “Do it yourself with a computer”. If the claimant does not have a computer, the patent answer from the ministry as direction to the front-line workers is to say, “Go to your library, because it is free; you can do it there online”. That is how it works.

• (1625)

I would urge all hon. members' to think long and to look into their hearts, because as the hon. member said, everyone has unemployed people in their ridings. I would urge members to look long and hard at this bill, and hopefully they can support it.

Business of Supply

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, my colleague makes a number of very good points about employment insurance. I want to talk to him a little bit about employment insurance as a stimulus. A number of studies have indicated that investing in social infrastructure is a good stimulus, but particularly investing in EI is a very good stimulus. A study shows that for every dollar put into EI, we get more than \$1.60 back in spinoffs. It is very important.

I want to ask the member about a claim that the Conservative government is making. They are suggesting that by not raising premiums, that is actually a \$4.5 billion stimulus.

I recommend that all Canadians go to the Caledon Institute's website, because it is wonderful. Particularly members of the government should go there, because they would learn an awful lot. The institute is suggesting that the Conservatives saying it is a stimulus not to raise the rates is similar to announcing a \$236 billion stimulus by announcing an increase in taxes and then deciding not to implement it.

EI is a good stimulus. One does not have to make up stimulative effects of EI. So I wonder if my colleague would comment on how the government comes up with that figure.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Madam Speaker, I agree in the sense that, to reduce the EI premium and suggest it is a stimulus, tell that to the unemployed. Of course, I forgot; they do not pay employment insurance premiums.

We cannot stimulate an economy on the backs of the unemployed by suggesting they get a break on premiums when in fact they are no longer paying them. They have actually lost those.

As to the statistics the member quotes, I believe it is a \$1.64 stimulus when it comes to EI. So my colleague is correct that it is above \$1.60.

Every major economist in this country has said paying employment insurance benefits to those who are laid off is the quickest stimulus package we can get out the door, because we do not have to create another system. We do not have to have another layer built up. We actually have the program in place today, the rules in place today, and folks understand what those are and they can apply. That unto itself makes it so simplistic. All we have to do is change the regulations in the sense that, if we simply said in this House we would change the regulations and did it quickly, the two weeks would be gone and folks would be benefiting immediately. They would get paid and we would not have folks facing foreclosure and losing their homes. We would not have folks lined up at food banks. We would not have folks worried about being on social assistance.

In my region, we would not be worried about 70% of young people under the age of 25 leaving the region because they have lost hope of getting employment in the region in which they live.

• (1630)

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is a good answer from my colleague. He mentioned briefly in his speech the comments that the minister had made, that she did not want to make EI too lucrative or too easy to get. That is a very offensive comment to make to people who are losing their jobs through no fault of their own. I have heard from

people across the country, particularly in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, that it indicates a Reform Party view from years ago that does not reflect in any way the employment situation of today or the attitudes of most Canadians.

I wonder if the member shares my umbrage at those comments.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Madam Speaker, I would concur with that and use the word “umbrage”, because I think that is absolutely true. As I said earlier, the reason that people collect employment insurance is because they were working. They were not lying around somewhere looking for someone to send a cheque. That is not how they qualify. They have a long history of work and show that initiative, that energy, that sense of wanting to support their families and build their communities and this country.

For the minister to suggest that EI is lucrative, let me remind hon. members that claimants get 55¢ on the dollar. Imagine tomorrow if we had to take 55¢ on the dollar of our wage and live on it. I would suggest that members should go to see their banker if they have a mortgage. They had better see the credit union if they have a car loan, because they will need to renegotiate it. They will not be able to survive on 55¢ on the dollar, never mind getting food on the table, never mind making sure their children could play sports or participate in artistic or cultural endeavours.

We would not have that money any more. That discretionary income would dry up immediately if we were making 55¢ on the dollar. That 55¢ on the dollar is the basic minimum to get by. That is why the bill talks about at least a minimum of 60% and bringing a lot more folks onto the system to ensure they actually can survive through what looks like a terrible, terrible time in their lives.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Madam Speaker, it is with some pleasure and some sadness that I rise to speak to this motion today.

The pleasure is because of the pride I feel in my party for putting forward what I think is a measure that will be of immense assistance to hundreds of thousands of Canadians and it is something that I know is desperately needed in these tough economic times.

The sadness is because this is one of those measures that we as parliamentarians are forced to consider taking. Many Canadians are facing an economic disaster and a terrible fear for the future of parents and their children and the seniors whom they often support.

This issue is somewhat personal to me for a few reasons.

This is not just an issue of numbers or an issue of theory. I worked for 16 years for a trade union. I sat in my office every day, Monday to Friday, week after week, month after month. In just about every period of time that I was in my office, people who were laid off from their jobs or fired from their positions come to talk to me about their employment prospects and the fact that they were unable to get acceptable amounts of protection from government.

Business of Supply

I also wonder how many members of the House have been in that position. I wonder how many members have actually looked across a desk at the eyes of unemployed men or women who wonder how they will make their rent payments, or how they will buy groceries for their children or pay for their children's athletic programs or school supplies when they were faced with a two week waiting period.

I have heard many members in the House speak of the two week waiting period, calling it a deductible. What are we deducting from? We are deducting from the incomes of people. This is not a car we are talking about. This is not replacing items of property taken in a theft from one's garage. This is telling Canadians that they have no money for the next two weeks, and we do not care.

The Conservatives want to put five weeks on the end of a claim. What does that tell the people sitting across the desk from them, when they are wondering how they are going to buy groceries for the next two weeks.

I have had to explain to people why they do not qualify for benefits whatsoever. This is not a two week problem for them. Over 60% of Canadians, and almost 70% of women, seven out of ten unemployed women, will not get any benefits because of the measures the current government and previous Liberal governments put into place.

What do we say to them? Do we tell them they have to face the next six months without any income? Do we call that a deductible?

I wonder how many members in the House were ever on employment insurance. I would venture to guess that on the government's side of the benches, not many. I think if they had been on employment insurance, they might have a different perspective on this matter.

I have been on unemployment insurance, which is what it was called back in 1991. I received \$409 a week. The maximum amount a person can get now is about \$458 a week. We are talking an extra \$30 or \$40 after 18 years.

When workers come and tell us that they do not have any money for two weeks and six out of ten tell us they will not get any money at all, for the lucky 40% of workers, or 30% in the case of women, who do get benefits, they get an average of a little over \$300 a week.

• (1635)

Many members from British Columbia in the House have spoken to this issue. In Vancouver \$1,400 a month will barely pay the rent or the mortgage, yet that is the average amount we expect workers to raise their families on during this economic recession and downturn when they may be unemployed for many months. This is the reality of the issue. It is not just theory to these people.

I want to talk a bit about the motion before us. I hope all members of the House could find it in their conscience to support the motion. It takes positive measures that would help the Canadians I spoke of and it would provide effective stimulus to our economy, far beyond many of the measures currently in the budget.

New Democrats propose to eliminate the two week waiting period. We propose to reduce the reference period to a minimum of

360 hours worked, regardless of the regional unemployment rate. Our motion would allow self-employed workers to participate in the system. It would increase benefits to at least 60% of income based on the best 12 weeks in the reference period. Our motion would encourage training and retraining.

It is not that the budget does nothing in the area of employment insurance. It does some things, but the steps it takes are insufficient.

I have heard members opposite speak about consultation with Canadians. They use glowing and exaggerated claims that the consultations on the budget were the biggest consultations in Canadian history. Really?

Who did the government consult? Did the government consult one representative of employee organizations? Did it consult one trade union? Did it consult one group that represents and works with unemployed workers? I do not think so.

I saw the blue ribbon panel with which the government consulted, and it was made up exclusively of people from the business sector. Not one person of that 10 or 12 member panel represented unemployed workers or understood their realities.

If the government did consult with unemployed workers or their representatives, it would not be able to stand in the House and say that those unemployed workers wanted five weeks tacked on at the end of an unemployment claim that hardly anybody gets, that condemns them to poverty and that does not address their needs.

I want to talk a bit about the stimulus effect of our measure.

Ian Lee, the MBA director at Carleton University's Sprott School of Business, argues that employment insurance is the single best tool for the government to use as a means of providing economic stimulus. Why? Putting money into the hands of middle and working class Canadians immediately is sound economics in a time of recession because those people will spend that money. They will put it in their communities. They will patronize their local businesses. They will purchase clothing and items for their children. That money will be circulated.

Using the multiplier formula, every dollar spent on employment insurance results in \$1.64 being injected into the economy. That number is just ahead of the multiplier for infrastructure dollars spent, but is a much quicker response for the economy.

I also want to talk a bit about proportionality. The government has claimed that it is putting \$1 billion into training and approximately \$2 billion in the budget is allocated toward employment insurance. I want to contrast that. That sounds like a lot of money and it is nothing to sneeze at.

The government is proceeding with \$55 billion of corporate tax cuts and has guaranteed \$75 billion of bad debts and mortgage-backed securities held by banks in our country. It has allocated \$125 billion to profitable corporations and has allocated \$2 billion to the hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers. That is less than 2% for workers.

Business of Supply

That tells a lot about the priorities of the government. It answers the questions that I hear repeatedly about why New Democrats do not support the budget. We do not support the budget because it is imbalanced, unwise and it will not help Canadians.

New Democrats want to help unemployed workers and their families. We urge all members of the House to support the motion as I am sure they want to do the same.

•(1640)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I listened closely to the member for Vancouver Kingsway's remarks. As he indicated, he has had a lot of experience in dealing with people who are unemployed. In fact, it is one of the most difficult issues we deal with in our office as well. They are heart-rending stories, and the callous attitude of the minister and the government is unacceptable.

I agree with the member's remarks that the most crucial period is the first two weeks. I think Canadians need to understand that it is not just two weeks, it is actually four weeks. Could the member explain that? Yes, there is the two week waiting period, but it is another two weeks before people get their cheques.

How can we expect people who have suddenly lost their jobs, and many people now are suddenly losing their jobs, to survive for a month? They are operating on credit cards. The government has failed to take the opportunity to address that end of unemployment insurance. Maybe the member could go further to explain.

I believe that is where the stimulus would be. If we covered those first two weeks, then that would be putting money back into the economy, stimulating it, putting it where it is needed most, rather than, as the government has tended to do, giving the money to people who probably are saving it rather than spending it and using it as a stimulus package.

Mr. Don Davies: Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his astute and sensitive observations on behalf of working Canadians.

He is absolutely right about the amount of time. However, I would respectfully suggest that it is even longer than four weeks. The employment insurance administrators have a guideline, a benchmark, of trying to get cheques processed within 28 days of a claim being filed. However, I think it is well known among most Canadians and members of the House that they are having an extremely difficult time meeting that and, in fact, are not getting cheques to Canadians for even weeks after that. Therefore, my hon. colleague is absolutely right that Canadians are facing periods of five, six or seven weeks before they get cheques. Once again, that is if they get them at all because the majority of Canadians will not see any cheque at all.

I also want to talk a bit about what those people face in that five or six week period. My hon. colleague mentioned them having to live on credit cards, and that is exactly true.

I am familiar with many local organizations. The union I worked for, the Teamsters Union, Local 31, 213, 155, 464, the operating engineers, the specialized construction workers, the CAW, CUPE, HEW, all of those unions face members, and even workers who are not members of those unions, coming to them for assistance. They

ask if they can have a loan or if there is a benevolent fund. Many times unions will go into their treasuries to help those workers get through the five or six weeks, without pay, to subsidize what should be a sacred right in our country, what should be a safety net that these workers have paid for and have come to expect.

I will conclude my answer to the question by saying this is an insurance program. This is not charity. Workers pay into this program. It comes off their cheque every two weeks. They have a right to receive this money. It is not a privilege.

•(1645)

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Madam Speaker, the member comes from B.C. British Columbia, which has been hit harder than any other province because we have an appalling incompetent government under Gordon Campbell and complete negligence from the Conservative government that takes B.C. for granted.

How would the changes that the NDP proposes support the 68,000 British Columbians who have lost their jobs in the last two months?

Mr. Don Davies: Madam Speaker, Canada lost 129,000 jobs in January alone. British Columbia lost 18,000 manufacturing jobs alone. B.C. has lost 35,000 jobs in January in total. I want to mention that many of those workers are from the immigrant communities, where recessions tend to hit those communities hardest and first.

A New Democratic government in British Columbia would put the interests of those workers and those families first, which would be a refreshing change from the current government in British Columbia.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Laval.

It is a great pleasure for me to take the floor today in this House because I am particularly concerned by the issue raised by my hon. colleague from Hamilton Mountain. I believe it is absolutely crucial for those who will be hardest hit by the economic crisis we are currently experiencing, namely the unemployed.

To begin, I want to say that I am completely in favour of this motion, which covers a number of the main themes that the Bloc Québécois has been defending for many years in connection with employment insurance, as well as Bill C-308 which was recently introduced by my colleague from Chambly—Borduas on February 10.

Business of Supply

We know that the measures proposed in this motion are not new. Four years ago, the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities adopted a report recommending these same measures: elimination of the waiting period; introduction of a qualifying period of 360 hours regardless of the regional rate of unemployment; increase of the salary covered from 55% to 60% based on the best 12 weeks; and introduction of a provision allowing self-employed workers to contribute voluntarily to the employment insurance plan.

We in the Bloc Québécois also believe that these measures would substantially improve the employment insurance system, which for about 15 years now has been but a shadow of what it used to be. This is to be vigorously condemned for as long as this injustice persists.

In the last 20 years, the coverage rate of the employment insurance system has been cut by half. The ratio of recipients to unemployed has fallen from 84% to 46% because the qualifying criteria were substantially and unfairly tightened in the 1990s.

We all know what followed: the government misappropriated staggering surpluses from the employment insurance fund, surpluses whose size was due solely to the tightening of the qualifying criteria. It is high time that the government finally recognized this injustice and did everything in its power to remedy it. This injustice is denounced not only by the Bloc Québécois and the NDP, but also by all the unions and all the groups advocating for workers' rights. This injustice has resulted in the aberration of an employment insurance plan that does not even cover half of the persons unemployed.

The statements made this afternoon in oral question period by the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development are totally incorrect. It is not true that 82% of contributors to the plan can receive employment insurance. In the last report on employment insurance coverage, the department's figures were much gloomier. In fact, barely 64% of contributors had access to EI benefits. That is nothing less than unacceptable.

The minister compared the employment insurance system to a private system, which is rather cynical because she reduced the state's role to that of a corporation motivated solely by financial gain. Following that logic, she is saying that the insurer could decide not to compensate 36% of its clients. Nobody would stand for that kind of attitude. Such a company would be accused of scandal, fraud, theft and mean-spiritedness. And rightly so, I might add.

So why does the government think that it has the right to just ignore the dire straits in which 36% of the people who contribute to the fund and then lose their jobs find themselves? Why? What for? Nothing justifies that kind of attitude, which demonstrates the government's alarming indifference to its social responsibilities.

The Minister of Human Resources' new title is very telling. By replacing "social development" with "skills development", the Conservatives have made their position clear: no more compassion, no more social safety net. The Conservatives have found the fastest, easiest way to eliminate "social" anything from their list of responsibilities: just take it out of the title. The Bloc Québécois will continue to remind them of their responsibilities in that respect, and they will not soon forget.

And now, back to the motion before us. Exactly five weeks ago, I had an opportunity to talk about a bill introduced by my colleague from Brome—Missisquoi, who proposed eliminating the waiting period. As I said then, the waiting period is, quite simply, a way to punish the unemployed for losing their jobs. This is a completely unjustifiable policy that merely exacerbates the already unbearable situation in which the unemployed find themselves.

People are waiting longer and longer to receive their employment insurance benefits, often longer than four weeks, and the waiting period adds two long weeks to that time. This is not about extending the employment insurance benefit period by two weeks. This is just about changing the time when benefits start flowing so that people who have lost their jobs are not placed in an unendurable situation for those first two weeks.

According to numbers from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, this measure would cost some \$900 million.

● (1650)

Well, \$900 million is a far cry from the \$57 billion denied workers over the past 20 years. This \$900 million would be injected in its entirety into the Canadian economy, as the government itself admits in its evaluation of the economic impact of the measures relating to employment insurance in the recent budget.

In this recession, it is \$900 million that would benefit both the unemployed and the businesses where the unemployed would be spending the sums they received.

The other measure in this motion I would like to discuss today is the reduction of the number of hours needed to qualify for employment insurance benefits. At the moment, the number of hours varies between 420 and 910. That is far too much. This is the main reason so many unemployed people do not benefit from coverage under the plan. According to the CSN, some 39% of the workforce works fewer than 35 hours a week. This 39% then is not eligible under the 12 week minimum. With the number of hours set at 360, which the Bloc has long called for, an estimated 70% to 80% of those unemployed could collect benefits, and the level of coverage would be returned to what it was 20 years ago.

Once again, this is a measure that has the support of all the unions and all the groups defending the rights of the unemployed and it was given support on a number of occasions by the committee on human resources and—social or skills—development, according to whether the social mission of the government is to be kept or dropped.

It is perhaps not supported by the former director of the Bank of Canada, whom the member for Huron—Bruce quoted, but I prefer to stick with the opinion expressed by people close to the concerns of the unemployed, who work not only with figures but with people in difficulty.

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In conclusion, I would like to express a reservation about this motion, one that the NDP knows well, where Quebec is involved, but does not always include. It concerns respect for the jurisdictions of Quebec and the provinces established under the constitution. If we in the Bloc support the government's investing in the training and re-training of the workforce, it must be done by transferring the amounts involved unconditionally to the Government of Quebec.

These are provincial jurisdictions, as everyone knows, and there is no question of our backing off on this matter or of supporting a measure that would force the Government of Quebec to report to the federal government. I also take this opportunity to strongly criticize the federal government's attempts in this regard in its current negotiations with the Government of Quebec on the transfer of \$700 million over six years for workforce training.

Apart from this reservation, I am delighted to support the NDP motion.

• (1655)

[*English*]

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I listened to my colleague with great interest because when it comes to employment insurance, it seems that we are all in the same situation with respect to our constituents who find themselves in many cases in very heartbreaking situations when they are forced to go on EI.

I say "forced to" because no one really wants to have to avail themselves of employment insurance. They would much rather work. Unfortunately, with what is happening in our country more and more companies are either cutting their workforce or closing their doors entirely and there are fewer and fewer jobs for which people can avail themselves. They are finding that they are not able to put food on the table and not able to pay their bills.

What we need is a government that is aware of how difficult the situation is and will put some measures in place to speed up the process. I have constituents who wait for six weeks in order to get money from the EI system which is simply not fair. I am wondering if my colleague could suggest ways other than what the government is proposing in terms of speeding up the process.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Madam Speaker, I would like to thank the member for her question. We absolutely must eliminate the waiting period for workers who are losing their jobs. I would like to add that, often, these workers have not had a chance to set aside a lot of money. They wake up one morning and find themselves without the means to keep up with their daily expenses.

Eliminating the waiting period would allow them, after having lost their jobs, to have access to some money and avoid going further into debt by using a high interest rate credit card to pay for family's and children's daily necessities. Eliminating the waiting period would give these workers quick access to some money.

• (1700)

Mr. Serge Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, BQ): Mr. Speaker, you were not here, but I think that the chair occupant before you appreciated the quality of the speech given by this new member who

has recently joined us. It was one of her first speeches. She spoke seriously and it is obvious that she has studied the issue extensively.

She eloquently and precisely condemned a number of unfair aspects in the administration of the employment insurance system. He is one I found particularly spectacular. How can anyone sell insurance by telling people that they have to pay the premiums, but cannot receive any benefits?

This is a broad subject and the workforce is diverse. There are more and more self-employed workers in our society. It is probable that these people will be affected the most by the current crisis. Could she talk about them?

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his question, which is an excellent one.

I think offering self-employed workers the opportunity to contribute to employment insurance on a voluntary basis is long overdue. They account for about 17% of workers in Canada. I think that is enough to allow them the opportunity to contribute to the EI system on a voluntary basis. I would add that many of these self-employed workers are women, and many of them are single parents. Thus, I think it is high time we offered them the opportunity to contribute to the system.

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague, who gave a wonderful speech on the relevance of the motion moved here today by my colleague from Hamilton Mountain. I am pleased to rise to also respond to it.

The biggest problem with employment insurance is that people look only at the numbers and forget about the faces of the people who are unemployed in Quebec and in Canada. This morning at the Standing Committee on the Status of Women meeting, we heard witnesses from the Conseil national des chômeurs et chômeuses who explained the problems they are facing in relation to employment insurance. They came to convey the message that, first and foremost, unemployment affects human beings. They came to convey the message that, when we talk about people who lose their jobs, contrary to what our Conservative colleagues would have us believe, we are not talking about people who want to stay home doing nothing and therefore claim EI benefits.

There was even a lady 50 years of age who lost her job. She was terribly traumatized as a result. At 50 years old, when you lose your job, it's like losing your life. So this lady lost her job at age 50. She found herself dealing with post-traumatic shock: diabetes and fibromyalgia. She cannot work regularly any more and is having difficulty finding another job. She found something at 15 hours a week. At first it was 25 hours a week, but it is in a school in the Saint-Hyacinthe region, and unfortunately she is unable to work more hours because when the students are not there, the hours are cut. She has had to leave her home and go to live with her mother. At 50, she leaves her home, says her goodbyes, sells her furniture and has to go live with her mother. It is not normal, when you have worked all your life, when you have done your part as a citizen up to age 50 and paid your contributions, to find yourself in a situation where you are forced to give up your home and your things, and go off like an beggar back to mother, at age 50.

Business of Supply

I know that numbers are important because of course, numbers talk. Last week, we learned from Statistics Canada that about 47% or 48% of women were eligible to receive employment insurance benefits when they lost their jobs. However, this depends on the way the numbers are calculated, the way they are devised, and where and how they are collected.

Never mind what they tell us on the other side. When they tell us that most people who have paid into employment insurance are entitled to money when they lose their jobs, it is not true: it is a shameful lie. As a parliamentarian, it makes me very angry to hear things like that. That is just telling stories about the victims and pulling the wool over our eyes, when they know full well that when people lose their jobs, they have no other option than to go to the office of the Conseil national des chômeurs et chômeuses, because they have no other means of defence.

When one hears such things, one wonders what can be done to fix the system, to heal it. Is there not enough money in the system? Did people not pay enough in years past? Is that it? I believe there is a \$55 billion surplus now, and that is quite a sum. It seems to me there is no lack of money to give back to the people who lose their jobs.

Is it because of opposition members who are opposed to changing the employment insurance system because they have no vision, because they do not realize that losing your job is something terrible?

• (1705)

Is it because the Bloc Québécois has never tabled a bill to reform the employment insurance system? I can say that the answer to all these questions is no. The answer I can give is that the only obstacles we have are the ones the government has created. And that is not normal. The government is supposed to look after its citizens. It has the duty to look after its citizens, the duty to ensure that every citizen is properly represented and has what he or she needs.

That is covered by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom. How can we allow a government that represents the people to contravene the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms? It makes no sense. I am convinced that if all members in this House were to take five minutes and think about their duty as parliamentarians, they would realize fully what needs to be done to represent those who elected us and who make it possible for us to be here.

When my colleague introduced this motion, she demonstrated a passion that we, in the Bloc Québécois, have felt for a long time. We want justice for the most disadvantaged and the most vulnerable; we want justice for all those who are struggling without adequate representation because they are represented by Conservatives. We will definitely be supporting this motion.

However, I have the same reservations as my colleague. That is normal. We need only look at what is currently happening in Canada. Women are being denied pay equity. Their rights are being taken away. In terms of what Quebec is doing, we hope that it will continue to make decisions for the people it represents. I guarantee that Quebec is different. We do not have the same values or the same ideas and when we talk about social values, we mean protecting the most vulnerable and the most disadvantaged.

We are in the midst of an economic crisis. If we had no money, I might be able to understand that the government would be considering trimming the fat. But it is not trimming the fat in Afghanistan. We have seen all the money it has invested in deadly weapons and the tools of war. We have seen all the money invested in tax havens that has not been recovered. With this money alone we could have helped thousands of unemployed people who need help, not help to sit around and do nothing at home, but support to help them pay their rent, buy food for their children, live decently and so on. With only 55% of what they once earned, they would not live like kings.

I think that my colleague was absolutely correct when she spoke about the way we should be reviewing the employment insurance system. The bills that the Bloc Québécois has introduced are entirely relevant and take into account the reality and needs of the people. Contrary to our Conservative colleagues, when we say we have visited and consulted the people, we really did consult them. These were not phony consultations. We did not meet with a few people one night, and then turn around and say that we had met with everyone concerned about that issue.

We are meeting people out in the field, and the groups and people that represent them, and we have a much better idea of what these people need, what they want and what they are asking us to demand on their behalf.

We will definitely be supporting this motion, but we will definitely also be making sure that the motion respects Quebec's jurisdiction.

• (1710)

Mr. Robert Carrier (Alfred-Pellan, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleagues from Laval and Saint-Lambert for their fine presentations. Their testimonies were very touching and of course I support them. I have never had to turn to employment insurance, but I am nevertheless aware that people are losing their jobs, especially in this time of economic crisis.

My colleague from Laval was talking about the money the government has at its disposal. There are many economic stimulus programs. Some \$4 billion is being invested to help Ontario's economy, while almost no money is being invested in employment insurance. Does she think this stems from the current government's ideology, in that it does not really want to help people who lose their jobs?

Ms. Nicole Demers: Mr. Speaker, I would have a hard time answering that question without mentioning what is happening today at the United Nations. Women's groups from across Canada and throughout Quebec have come together to denounce the Conservative government and its attitude towards women, as well as the cuts it has made in connection with pay equity and in other areas. If there is one area in which women suffer the most, it is employment insurance. Thus, I truly believe that these cuts and measures are based on ideology. Those decisions were not made out of concern for the people, but rather with their own ideology in mind.

*Private Members' Business***PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS***[English]*

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the previous member from the Bloc who shared time with the member for Saint-Lambert. The member for Laval, as she went into her speech, agreed with everything that her colleague from the Bloc said.

Therefore I want to ask this question. I quote what the member for Saint-Lambert said: "The transfer of the sums of money to Quebec should be unconditional".

The member for Laval agreed with the member for Saint-Lambert. What did she mean by "unconditional"? To my understanding, it is a program that is a national program for Canadians from one end of the country to the other. What does that mean, so that I can have a better idea?

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Mr. Speaker, despite his good faith, the hon. member confused the employment insurance program and the training programs. Of course, employment insurance programs are managed by the federal government, but training programs are managed by the Government of Quebec.

Mr. Thomas Mulcair (Outremont, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I also have a question for my colleague, the member for Laval, whom I congratulate on an excellent speech. I would like to know how she reacted when she heard the Conservative minister responsible for employment insurance say that enhanced benefits would be too generous. What she said was that it was "lucrative" to get employment insurance, as if it were something people did by choice, not because they were victims of a situation.

• (1715)

Ms. Nicole Demers: Mr. Speaker, the woman who appeared before our committee this morning told us that she made \$4.38 an hour on employment insurance. I do not know whether this is lucrative or too generous. This may be too generous for some, but I am sure it is not generous enough for others. You cannot pay all your bills on \$4.38 an hour when you work 15 hours a week.

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 5:15 p.m., pursuant to the order made earlier today, all questions necessary to dispose of the opposition motion are deemed to have been put and a recorded division is deemed to have been requested and deferred until Tuesday, March 10, 2009, at the expiry of the time for government orders.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Mr. Speaker, I believe if you seek the consent of the House, you would find unanimous consent to see the clock at 5:30 p.m.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 5:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed in today's order paper.

*[English]***AIR PASSENGERS' BILL OF RIGHTS.**

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP) moved that Bill C-310, An Act to Provide Certain Rights to Air Passengers, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to be speaking to Bill C-310 this evening, leading off on the first hour of what I hope will be a constructive debate.

I would like to begin by thanking Woodrow French, the mayor of Conception Bay South in Newfoundland, and Bruce Cran of the Consumers Association of Canada, who have been actively supporting the bill and have hit the road recently to promote it across the country.

We have been approached by a U.S. consumers group expressing interest in the bill, a group called FlyersRights.org run by its founder, Kate Hanni, who organized a press briefing in California regarding Bill C-310. She praised the bill as the best airline bill of rights legislation she has seen, and she will distribute copies to the U.S. legislators in Washington D.C.

Bill C-310 has been getting a lot of media interest, and with it, numerous responses from Canadians sending in their personal stories. Almost everyone from whom I received a response has been very supportive of the bill. There are always some people who are not, but most of them are supportive.

The bill is based on Private Member's Motion No. 465, introduced last year by the hon. member of Parliament for Humber-St. Barbe-Baie Verte of Newfoundland and Labrador from the Liberal Party, and the resolution passed unanimously in the House, but the government did not bring in the bill promised in the resolution.

Instead, it introduced the voluntary agreement called flight rights, which had no effect in law, but did promise the tarmac delays, for example, would not exceed 90 minutes before people would be let off the plane, so we then had a recognition at that time by the airlines that 90 minutes was a long enough time to keep people cooped up in a plane on the tarmac.

What did the airlines do? They proceeded to keep people on the tarmac for six to eight hours just three months later. So much for flight rights and I think the Conservatives recognize as well that we need tougher laws to govern this area.

Just three days ago the airlines decided that they will put flight rights in their tariff, voluntarily letting the Canadian transportation agency enforce it, but where are the penalties if they do not follow through? They did not last time, why should they now?

Private Members' Business

In addition, the airline letter is full of falsehoods about the actual bill. In terms of the National Airlines Council of Canada, it sent us a letter called "reality check", so I am responding in the same way, saying, "reality check": I want to deal with the concerns of the National Airlines Council of Canada's March 2 letter to all members of Parliament and the outright factual errors in that communication.

It says the maximum compensation for denied boarding in Bill C-310 is two to three times higher than in the EU, when it is exactly the same. We used the EU figures in the bill.

It says it was not consulted. The reality of private members' business is that there is not a lot of time for consultation with external parties in the development of a bill. A member whose name is drawn near the top of the list has 20 sitting days until the completed bill must be deposited at the House of Commons Journals Branch.

In this case, however, I did speak to representatives from both the National Airlines Council on the phone, gave them complete details of the bill, and invited them to give me an email response before the bill was sent for translation. We were making amendments right up to the very end, and I received no submissions from either party, unlike the Consumers Association of Canada, which did come forward with valuable contributions right up to the last day.

The National Airlines Council claims that the fares will rise as a result of this legislation. I would like to ask, did the fares rise when the Air Canada president earned \$26 million in 2007? That was a considerable amount of money that it expended at that time, and I do not think fares rose because of his salary. I do not really believe they would now either, because if airlines follow the rules in the bill, they would not pay any penalties. By our experience in Europe so far, it does not look like they are paying much in the way of penalties over there either.

The National Airlines Council says, "No jurisdiction has ever held airlines responsible for weather delays or cancellations. To do so is fundamentally incompatible with the safe operation of an aircraft". Well, neither are we. We have taken the exclusion from the European Union bill and put it verbatim into our bill, giving the airlines the extraordinary circumstances exclusion, which they are happily using in Europe the last four years. This statement implies that Bill C-310 would make an air carrier responsible for weather delays and cancellations when that is not the case.

● (1720)

Bill C-310 does not require an air carrier to pay compensation to a passenger in respect of a flight that has been delayed or cancelled due to weather. A flight that is cancelled due to weather falls within the exemption, which I already explained, and is provided for in the bill.

If the air carrier can prove that the cancellation was caused by extraordinary circumstances which could not have been avoided, even if all reasonable measures had been taken, under this subparagraph the air carrier is not required to pay compensation to a passenger whose flight was cancelled. This is the standard that has been adopted by the European Union and the cancellation due to weather clearly falls within this exemption.

All that an air carrier is required to do in a case of cancellation due to weather is: reimbursement, which is reasonable, or rerouting the passenger; meals and refreshments in relation to the waiting time, nothing wrong with that; hotel accommodation in cases where a stay of one or more nights is required; ground transportation between the airport and the place of accommodation; and a total of two telephone calls, telex or fax messages, or emails. There is nothing here that is unreasonable for an air carrier to do.

The European Union commissioned a study two years into their bill, about two years ago, after the rules were in effect. While the airlines have been aggressive in using extraordinary circumstances arguments to avoid paying compensation, all stakeholders agreed that the extraordinary circumstances exclusion was still a good and fair balance between the customer's right to compensation and fairness toward the airline. The reason for that is because it is held up in court. We do not want to tilt the bill too much against the airlines because then they will take it to court and they will win their point.

The bill covers denied boarding due to overbooked flights and specifically trying to get people off the flight by agreement, not by forcing them off the plane.

I was on a Northwest Airlines flight from Minneapolis several years ago. It needed six people off the plane. It got the volunteers by offering free passes to get people off the plane. Everyone was happy with that result and I am sure they are still talking about it to this day. Happy customers are what the airlines need.

If airlines have to deny boarding to customers involuntarily, why should they not be paying compensation of \$500, \$800 or \$1,200, based on the length of the trip? The same compensation applies to cancelled flights. Europe has been doing this for four years. Bill C-310 was inspired by the EU legislation which has been in effect since February 17, 2005.

Air Canada operates in Europe, so it knows all about this legislation. The airlines know that in the EU airlines try to use the exemption as often as possible to avoid paying compensation to passengers. Airlines fought the EU legislation in court and they lost. They know this legislation is sound and it will hold up in court, which is why they are mounting such a big campaign against it. They know it is going to be popular with the public when it is passed.

Private Members' Business

I have spoken to many MPs, and while they all like the bill, several have questions about the compensation to passengers. I tell them that they can vote for the bill at second reading because it shows they agree with the principle, just like they all did a year ago on the resolution. If they disagree with it, they can come to the committee to try and get it amended. If they think the penalties are too high, they can bring an amendment reducing it to a level that they think is appropriate.

I have even asked the National Airlines Council for amendments, but I got the "Dear Member of Parliament" letter instead, with all the misinformation about the bill. How can it amend the bill when it is clear that it has not taken the time to even read it?

In most cases, we copied the compensation levels of the European Union, and by the way, those compensation levels were doubled in the European Union four years ago because it had earlier legislation from 1991 which dealt with denied boarding only. It did not deal with cancellations and it dealt with scheduled airlines only. It did not deal with charters and it had penalties that were too low, so four years ago it expanded it to include charters. It expanded it to include cancellations and it doubled the penalties. The review panel, two years later, said the penalties were just fine the way they are. They are not too high and not too low.

Why should passengers not have the right to cancel and get a refund after a four hour delay? Why should passengers not get a meal voucher after a two hour delay? Why should passengers not get \$100 payment if the airline misplaces their baggage and does not notify them within an hour after finding it? Will the \$100 bankrupt the airlines or will it cause them to smarten up and stop misplacing baggage, and not notifying us when the baggage is found?

• (1725)

Why should customers not expect better service? Why should passengers not be informed of flight changes, delays and cancellations under penalty to the airlines? Why should the new rules not be posted at the airline counter to inform customers of their rights and the process to file for compensation? Why should the public not expect all-in-one pricing so they know the total cost of the flight before they click the buy button?

Because the EU carriers have fought the law so hard in Europe, it has taken the small claims court system in Europe to get settlements out of the system. There is no lawyer required. Passengers in Canada can still complain to the Canadian Transportation Agency, but as in Europe, the transportation agencies are not the bodies that are getting the payments. It is the small claims court. British Airways is a good, recent example where it received a settlement on behalf of a large number of claimants through the courts.

The bill would not solve all the people's problems, but it is fair to customers and the airlines. The airlines that follow the rules will not pay a cent. Airlines that claim extraordinary circumstances too often risk getting even tougher rules in the future. Bill C-310 applies to all Canadian air carriers and all air carrier operations that take place in Canada. Why should an Air Canada customer receive better treatment in Europe than in Canada?

In conclusion, I want to issue a call to action. I ask Canadians to not just sit there and say that this is a good idea and hope that it

passes. I ask them to go to their computers, send their MP a message requesting him or her to support the bill and send me a copy so that we can keep track of their support. I ask them to send a letter to their local newspaper editor.

MPs listen to their constituents. It is how they get here in the first place. They will keep getting re-elected if they listen to their constituents' concerns. This is a free vote in Parliament and members are free to vote any way they want. The airlines are sending them letters and asking for meetings to try to convince them to vote against the bill. I want Canadians to help me even the odds and counter this special interest lobby that is working against their interests.

All the airlines have to do is keep fresh air and lights working, make sure the toilets are working, make sure food and water are provided, and allow for disembarkation of the airplane if it is possible to do so without risk to health or safety of the passengers. They are suggesting that we have an absolute in the bill that they are going to have to start paying their penalties after one hour no matter what. There is enough of an exemption in there to allow them a certain amount of leeway. If it is going to risk the safety of the passengers, they do not have to let people off within the hour. It is as pure and simple as that.

If they do not want to do these things, why should they not compensate the passengers? If \$500 is too high, then bring in an amendment to lower it. However, if it is lowered too much, the airlines will keep the passengers locked up for hours without the lights, air, toilets, food and water.

The next time people are on a flight and things go wrong, they will wish they had emailed or written their MP. They will wish they had written a letter to the editor to support this bill and if that person is an MP, he or she will have wished they had voted for this bill.

• (1730)

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am sure many of the people he was talking to out in the public would be in favour of an initiative like this, so I would like to congratulate the member and also the member for Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte for coming up with this concept in the first place.

I am pretty excited about the concept, but I have a couple of questions. The success of any bill depends on the consultation with those who would be affected. I would like to ask the member, how many airlines has he talked to and what were their estimated costs? I am particularly interested in what Air Canada and WestJet said. What did they say this would cost them based on their experience? He said that those airlines have had experience in Europe already, so it should be an easy calculation. How much would the fares go up?

Private Members' Business

The second question is related to fairness. A lot of delays such as lineups, de-icing and things like that are caused by the airport, not the airlines. I am wondering if, in his bill, the airport would have to pay that fee or would he unjustly put that fee onto the airlines when they have nothing to do with the problem?

Mr. Jim Maloway: Mr. Speaker, there were many items in the member's question.

We have had a very difficult time trying to find out how much the airlines are paying in Europe, as did the study commissioned by the European Commission. In fact, almost all the airlines refused to give the information. There were only a couple that were very forthright about it.

We know from the history of the bill that the airlines claim extraordinary circumstances all the time, as many times as they can get away with it. It is up to alert passengers to say, "That is not true; that is not the case at all," and follow through with small claims court actions.

We need a law, but the enforcement is a big issue. It is really up to the passengers themselves. They cannot take action if there is no law to protect them, but if there is a law, those passengers who are alert will take action.

I have answered this question many times about what it will cost the airlines. The truth is it will cost them nothing if they simply follow the rules. WestJet, for example, does not overbook, so it will pay nothing. As a matter of fact WestJet's criticisms are not very strong at all. I have been on radio shows with its representatives and they are not hostile to the bill, let us put it that way.

However, in terms of trying to—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Questions and comments, the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport.

Mr. Brian Jean (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was very happy to hear the member suggest to other members that before they vote on this piece of legislation that they read it first. I think that is a great concept.

My first question is, does that mean the policy of the NDP members will change for the next budget and that they will actually read it before they decide to vote against it?

My second question is, why did the member refuse to meet with the two major Canadian airlines when they asked to meet with him to go over the bill some two weeks ago?

Mr. Jim Maloway: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated in my speech, I spoke to the representatives of the airlines before we sent the bill for translation. They did not respond. They were given time. I explained the bill to them and they were given time to respond. They did not. The Consumers' Association on the other hand did respond. In fact, it did get a provision put in the bill because of its response.

I cannot account for why the airlines did not do it, but I received the letter addressed to members of Parliament just as the parliamentary secretary did and I am sure that I will be talking to them again very soon. They are on radio shows that I am on, so I have had occasion to talk to them.

• (1735)

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the bill. It follows on the motion that we put forward in the House in the last Parliament that was endorsed unanimously, not only by members of the Liberal Party of Canada, the Bloc Québécois and the New Democratic Party, but members of the Conservative Party of Canada as well. The motion called on the government to bring forward legislated consumer protection with respect to the airline industry.

I have read the bill in depth. I agree with the concept thoroughly, as all members do and they voted unanimously for it. However, I was wondering if the hon. member would be open to amendments to his bill with perfections to create better legislation at the committee stage.

Mr. Jim Maloway: Mr. Speaker, that is the best question I have had all day. I want to tell the member that I would welcome his amendments. I have a half dozen myself.

I have been around politics long enough to know that even ministers when they bring in bills sometimes amend their own bills a half dozen times before they get through the process.

I would look for amendments from all parties in this Parliament to make the bill successful, and it cannot be successful unless everyone is involved.

Mr. Brian Jean (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very glad to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate on Bill C-310 brought forward by the member for Elmwood—Transcona.

Over the past Christmas season, severe weather wreaked tremendous havoc at airports across the country. I know that because I travel quite frequently. Being a member of Parliament from northern Alberta, I have the opportunity to travel on planes. I can assure the member and others in the House that if anyone knows what it is like to travel in Canada and enjoy the diverse weather across this country, it is members from the west because they have to do more travelling. I remember that bad weather forced many cancellations and delays, which obviously were beyond the control of the airlines. Unfortunately, too many people spent hours in airports lying across plastic chairs and getting snacks from vending machines. Some members in the House probably had that unfortunate experience.

Let me be clear. Protecting Canadian travellers is a priority for this Conservative government and will remain a priority for this government. We are committed to consumer protection and have taken measures to strengthen that protection.

In 2007, for instance, we brought forward Bill C-11, which improved transparency by requiring air carriers to publish their terms and conditions of carriage on their websites, a good step to put forward for consumers to understand what their rights are. The Canadian Transportation Agency was also mandated to continue its complaints process as a permanent program.

Private Members' Business

In 2008 our government introduced the flight rights program as a result of, in part, Parliament's wish to protect consumers more thoroughly. This is a campaign to inform air travellers of the rights and options available to them should they encounter difficulties when travelling.

In budget 2009, again we introduced measures to modernize the Competition Act and to better protect Canadians from price fixing and misleading advertising, things which are simply not acceptable. The changes that this government made will instill greater confidence in advertising and more meaningful penalties to deter misleading advertising and mass marketing fraud, again things which are unacceptable.

I would like to highlight a few key components of the consumer protection measures we as a government have put in place for air travellers.

Under the Canada Transportation Act, all carriers operating within Canada are required to have written terms and conditions of carriage readily accessible to passengers. These are often printed on the back of the ticket or agreed to when reservations are made online so that consumers will know their rights at the time they purchase their tickets.

These terms and conditions must reflect the carrier's policy regarding persons with disabilities, the acceptance of children, cancelled or delayed flights, lost or damaged baggage, denied boarding due to overbooking, and ticket reservations. These currently exist. They reflect the passenger's rights as a consumer and the carrier's obligation.

Carriers are actually obliged to live up to these terms and conditions and if they fail to do so, consumers can turn to the Canadian Transportation Agency for recourse. The agency can impose different measures, including corrective measures, such as a refund of expenses incurred by the passenger, and can also direct a carrier to change or suspend its terms and conditions of carriage.

It should be noted that in the United States consumers must actually turn to the courts instead of an agency like the Canadian Transportation Agency when carriers fail to live up to their commitments. We all know that turning to the courts is very expensive and time consuming and, quite frankly, not acceptable to Canadians.

Countries in the European Union are required to have a complaints process, but the complaints processes in the European Union actually vary in their effectiveness and are more limited in scope to what we currently have in Canada. In Canada we have a consumer protection regime that ensures that the terms and conditions offered by carriers in Canada are not only reasonable but that carriers actually stand by them and stand up for consumers.

These terms and conditions are determined by international norms of practice, normal travel practice and healthy competition, which is so very important in today's global economic crisis. They are the carrier's commitments to its clients.

• (1740)

It is easy to understand the frustrations of passengers because, let us face it, many in the House are very frustrated by travel from time

to time. The people who experienced the frustration of flights being delayed or cancelled over the Christmas season were, quite frankly, unhappy. Everyone travels hoping to arrive at their destinations on time. However, we live in a winter country. We live in a huge country, approximately 1.2 people per square mile, the lowest population density in the world. Given our climate, inevitably there will be unfortunate delays and inconveniences in travel, particularly in our harsh winters, our large snowfall and our dispersal of population.

Over the last couple of weeks I have heard from many industry representatives. I have had an opportunity to meet with representatives from WestJet, Air Canada and from other airline carriers that service our country. Let us talk about what they think. The Tourism Industry Association of Canada stated that it shares the concerns raised by the NACC, the National Airlines Council of Canada, regarding many aspects of the proposed legislation and does not believe that the highly prescriptive and punitive measures such as Bill C-310.

This sentiment was echoed by the Canadian Airports Council and the International Air Transportation Association. It represents 230 international carriers around the world, including all major airlines in Canada. The National Airlines Council of Canada said that while Bill C-310 claims to safeguard consumer interest, the proposed measures would in fact exacerbate delays and add a new layer of traveller inconveniences and costs.

It is also important for us to try to understand the operational realities of running an airline in today's competitive environment. For instance, bad weather in Vancouver will cause delays in Toronto. It will cause ripple effects across the country, especially during the busiest time of travel and especially during the harshest part of winter. We must also be mindful that safety must be the primary concern for our transportation system.

The Air Transportation Association of Canada in a letter dated March 4, 2009, states that it will lower passenger safety in Canada by encouraging more risk taking.

Yes, it will lower passenger safety in Canada by encouraging more risk taking. There is nothing more important to this Conservative government than the safety of Canadians and we are going to make sure that they remain safe while they travel. Safety must come first.

We can and must learn from other countries. We must review the United States' legislation, the European legislation and look at other options. We must also be mindful that Canada's weather and geography are truly unique and these realities must be taken into consideration when we think about what must be done to enhance consumer protection legislation and ultimately serve those whom we all serve in this place, Canadians.

I look forward to working with the member who introduced this bill and all members of the House and the committee cooperatively to find solutions that will protect Canadian consumers without punishing Canadian carriers for factors beyond their control.

Private Members' Business

We must ensure during this time of economic global downturn that we protect Canadians' interests and at the same time make sure that airlines remain competitive. It is a balancing act and we as a government will do the best job for Canadians.

● (1745)

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I was almost encouraged by what I heard the parliamentary secretary say a moment ago. He talked about co-operation in this House and having governments reflect what the people actually want, especially when they have expressed it in this House.

Last June, not that long ago, 240 members of Parliament from all parties stood in their places and unanimously supported a motion by my colleague from Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, who said that what we need to do is respond to the needs of Canadians when they are consumers of a service that we in Canada have come to take for granted as part of the lifestyle and the standard of living that is demanded by a nation of our size in our part of the hemisphere.

What would a responsible government do when the unanimous voice of the people is expressed in a bill that is reflected in my colleague from Elmwood—Transcona today?

One would expect results immediately.

The parliamentary secretary speaks of all those indications, those motions, those brochures. In fact, some of the initiatives of his government resulted in a paper going forward as a recommendation to the airline industry in September.

That was in September. What did the people in the airline industry do? Well, in September they heard voices of elections, so they said, "Let us wait". They waited and they waited. The member for Elmwood—Transcona can hardly be blamed for the lack of action on the part of the government.

We could be in an entirely different place if the government had taken the initiative given to it by the authority of a unanimous vote in the House and had said that this was what the public wanted.

There were not penalties of the nature that our hon. colleague calls for in Bill C-310. Now we are talking about making a comparison with what happens in the United States, what happens in the EU, and what the economic and financial implications are for individual companies, collective organizations, airport authorities and tourist organizations.

We would not have to be in that kind of discussion if the government had just done what the parliamentary secretary said it would do.

Is it any wonder that members of Parliament, whether long-standing members of Parliament like my colleague from Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte or new members of Parliament like my colleague from Elmwood—Transcona, fill in the need because the Canadian public wants action?

What do we do? We agree in principle with the implied contractual arrangement that is inherent in this legislation. I say the "implied contractual arrangement" because someone who is providing a service wants a contented client, and that client wants a

service for which he or she pays. Otherwise, there are consequences. Either there is delivery of service or there is an alternative.

The last motion in this House talked about that contractual framework. Our colleague, newly elected in October, said that we would like to put something else into this contractual arrangement. Nobody is doing anything on it. If it comes across now as being tough on the airlines or tough on the industry, it is because people are looking for an arbiter.

Who is that arbiter? The arbiters are right here. Members of Parliament from the other side are looking for the authority we had already given them in the last Parliament, but the last minister of transport chose not to act.

The current Minister of Transport may choose to act. A private member's bill is here before him. It has, I think, the same kind of support, unless a vote proves otherwise, that was shown for the last motion that was before this House.

● (1750)

A responsible and accountable minister would say that these ideas come not just from opposition members, but from a unanimous expression of the public view in the House of Commons of Canada.

Do we expect members of Parliament to do anything less than transform the frustration of citizens into a positive suggestion for change? Surely we want all stakeholders, all providers of that service to be at the table and work with members of Parliament, who are not the enemy. They are the carriers of the voice that cries for a service and a contractual arrangement that must be honoured by both parties.

Is the European experience the one to follow? Is the American experience the one to follow? Is it one that would nurture the business that would stimulate the Canadian economy and at the same time ensure we enjoy a level of service that everyone should take for granted?

We have demonstrated as consumers a willingness to pay. Perhaps we pay too much. For that willingness to pay, even the willingness to pay more than others, we expect a level of service commensurable, but no. We expect perhaps at least what everybody else gets for less, and I have become an editorialist when I say that.

The only editorializing that a member of Parliament should do in this place is to recall for all members that a unanimous expression of the House asked the airline industry, the business of travel, to respect what everyone in the country had already said was desired, was needed, and in fact should have been done.

Whom shall we blame for this lack of obligation? We cannot blame it on the weather. That is a hot topic today because the weather is blamed for everything. We have to blame it on the government.

The minister has a responsibility to the House and to everybody in Canada to come forward with regulations that would reflect the will of the House. He has a responsibility to put in place a system that would supervise the implementation of those regulations. He has a responsibility to put in place a system that would follow whether any breach of that relationship was modified.

Private Members' Business

Some would say that perhaps we are building a bureaucracy unnecessarily so, and I would agree. There has been a rupture of the goodwill that was expressed by a unanimous vote in the House. The industry saw that and the government realized it needed to have a working relationship. That goodwill was broken.

When that goodwill was broken, people came forward with compulsion. If people will not work, we will make them work. If they do not like the conditions, we have to come up with the reasons. Who needs that? A good business operation does not need that. A good business model that wants to be successful does not need that.

We used to have a quasi-monopolistic approach to the way the airline business was conducted. We have opened it up, and some people would say that we should not have done that. We have opened up the opportunity to engage in a contractual agreement freely and that the recourse to government, when it comes with a unanimous view of the entire House, is that partners to that contractual arrangement depart from consensus at their own peril.

What the member for Elmwood—Transcona, through Bill C-310, is telling the minister is that he should start fulfilling his obligations to the public. He should start being responsible and demonstrate the accountability about which he so frequently boasts. He should get busy because the House has already given him one chance.

• (1755)

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Bloc Québécois about Bill C-310, the private member's bill put forward by our NDP colleague.

Those who are watching will have understood in listening to the speeches that members' positions can differ somewhat. It is important to get to the heart of the matter on this air travel issue.

It is important to avoid creating an imbalance in order to secure an election victory. The Bloc Québécois wants to act responsibly on this issue. We are therefore going to support the bill so that it is sent to committee, but in its current form, it is not very persuasive. I listened to the member who proposed the bill say that he was open to changes and amendments. But proposing amendments to a bill does not mean they will be accepted. It is a bit more complicated than that.

This is a private member's bill, and an amendment that would change the nature of the bill would not be in order. There is some chance that, at the end of the debate, this bill might not pass as written because it could not be amended. I am not making any assumptions. I just want to give all of the options a chance. That could happen, but it would not be for lack of trying.

I understand the Liberal member's position. He pointed out that we were made all too aware of the issue because an incident occurred. In the spring of 2007, passengers were confined to a Cuban Air plane for some 10 hours because, apparently, the company did not pay the fees. The story remains unclear. I wrote to all of the authorities, but nobody wanted to take responsibility. I do not get the feeling that the bill, as written, will solve the problem either.

This situation happens in Canada, and not just with airlines. Governments, both Liberal and Conservative, created and accredited organizations known as airport authorities. These are para-governmental bodies, but they are not private entities. They rent airports; they lease them. They are made up of boards of directors, people from the sector, but they answer only to their boards of directors.

That makes it hard to figure out who is responsible. It may not always be the airline's fault. That is an important thing to understand in a country like ours, where we sometimes have more months of winter than of summer.

That is our reality, one that many European countries do not have to deal with. We have to be responsible and study the situation carefully. We must also avoid compromising the already tenuous situation of some airlines.

The National Airlines Council of Canada is an organization made up of the four largest airlines, but it is brand new. It was part of the Air Transport Association of Canada (ATAC), but it withdrew to create its own association. Things are not that simple in the wonderful world of aviation.

The goal is not to shut down airlines. That would only create monopolies. At any rate, it would not benefit consumers. Fares will increase when airlines are eliminated one by one and only a single airline remains.

Thus, we must be able to create this balance and I am not sure that Bill C-310, as presented, does that. However, we in the Bloc Québécois have sufficient knowledge of the problem to discuss it in committee and call all witnesses, including the government.

I have a message for the government: the time has come, as we send this bill to committee, to consider tabling a bill that would establish that balance and make airlines and airport authorities accountable. Thus, it would be very clear and travellers would know full well that airlines do have a certain responsibility.

• (1800)

Some airport authorities look after traffic control and are also often responsible for providing services. We should realize that, because of our winters, certain operations, such as de-icing, must be carried out. In some airports, de-icing can take as long as two and a half hours. With a bill such as the one before us, if passengers were disembarked after an hour and a half, what would it mean? It would mean that we lose our place in the departure line. That results in an undue delay. It is not easy.

The committee will have to take care to call all of the witnesses and take all the time it needs. If the committee can improve this bill, it will. However, if that is not possible because of the legislative framework, perhaps the government will have to consider drafting its own legislation to send to the committee. I am opening that door because we need to solve this problem. My Liberal colleague is right: this has gone on too long.

Private Members' Business

However, is a private member's bill the right way to do this? Once again, this has not been discussed with the airlines, and that is all we can find fault with. It is all well and good to try to pass a private member's bill at all costs, but if two airlines were to be put out of business as a result, things would be worse, not better. We would not have solved anything. The only thing we would have done is achieve a personal victory at the expense of all Canadians, and that is not the goal.

As I said, Bloc Québécois members will vote for this bill so that it can go to committee, and we will be there throughout the process. We will try to bring in all of the witnesses we need to shed light on the complex issue of airline passengers' rights. I am reaching out to the government. It needs to understand that the legislation we are considering is important. Now is the time to resolve the issue of protecting airline passengers, and maybe it should introduce a bill that would make airlines and airport authorities take responsibility, because they are the ones responsible for any problems that passengers might experience. That is where things stand.

If we do that all together, this will be a collaborative effort. The member who proposed the private member's bill will be proud to say that legislation came out of what he suggested in committee. Obviously, we are open to that. The important thing is to achieve our objective. That is the result. The important thing is not to score a political victory, where one side wins and the other loses. The important thing is to work for travellers who are fed up with the air travel problems they have to deal with. Airline tickets are expensive, so if we can bring the industry in line and that takes a bill, then we need to have a bill. If we can improve this bill, so much the better. If another bill is needed, then I hope the government will understand, and we will support it. Our promise to users and consumer protection associations is that they will have a voice, they will be heard in committee. We all need to have a clear understanding of the issue.

I personally have a soft spot for airport authorities. I would like to know what is happening with the Cubanair file because, two or three years later, I am still in the dark. No one wants to take responsibility for having kept passengers locked in a plane for more than 10 hours without food or access to toilets. That is the harsh reality. The bill will not fix this because the higher the fines are, the more the airlines will go to the courts to contest them. That means delays. We will not fix the problem, and the lawyers will collect their profit, but travellers will not benefit.

Once again, I am reaching out. We will support this bill so that it can be discussed in committee. If we can improve it in such a way as to satisfy passengers, airlines and those who are responsible for the problems, we will do so. If a new bill is necessary, we would encourage the government to please send it along for the committee's approval.

● (1805)

[English]

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very proud to be the seconder of the bill and I am pleased to speak to it tonight.

All air passengers deserve a bill of rights. Consumers have tolerated subpar service with no recourse for far too long. It is time to have legislation to protect consumers.

Let me illustrate this point with an example. When a person buys a car, which many people cannot do at this point in time because the banks are still charging consumers up to 10% for a car loan, but that is a discussion for another night, it comes with a warranty. There are also various safety and other standards the car must also meet when it is purchased. If anything is not as advertised and promised, consumers have a way to remedy the situation.

Another example is buying groceries. The same principle applies when one buys a loaf of bread. If it is stale, it can be returned. One will either be fully refunded the cost or get a new loaf of bread in exchange. The supermarket will be apologetic and will not demand proof that the bread is stale.

All of these principles seem to go out the window when consumers purchase an airline ticket. If we buy an airline ticket, which in some cases can cost the same amount as a small car, we almost have no rights at all, not even a guarantee that we will get the service for which we paid.

If our seat is broken on a long flight, or if the airline does not have our first choice of meal or if anything else goes wrong with our flight experience, we are unlikely to get fair compensation.

What is worse, if consumers voice their irritation with the poor service they receive, they run the risk of being accused of air rage, being arrested or, worse, banned from certain airlines for life.

The airlines currently have it all their own way. The power should be in the hands of the consumer. Right now, passengers are often trapped on aircraft that remain idled on the tarmac for several hours at a time.

Should this proposed legislation come into effect, airlines will have to pay compensation of up to \$1,200 to travellers stranded when their flights are overbooked or cancelled all together. Flights delayed more than two hours will force the airlines to provide passengers with food, drink and access to a telephone.

Passengers are also misled by airline companies that advertise cheap rates only to find out later, after they have booked their ticket, that the cost of their ticket has skyrocketed with administration fees, more taxes and other surcharges.

Should the bill come into effect, airline companies will have to advertise their rates honestly and include the applicable surcharges and additional rates.

The current reality is that consumers have little sway with the airlines. This is why consumers need a passenger bill of rights. Airlines currently benefit from bad behaviour, since passengers have little say in how services are delivered and no real recourse for poor treatment. Airlines can often act in ways that perhaps they should not, ways in which they would not act if commitments to passengers were upheld.

Private Members' Business

An example is cancelled flights. I am sure that almost all of us here have had a flight cancelled at one point in our lives. In addition to the inconvenience, cancellations often force passengers to miss important events, meetings and/or holidays.

This practice, highly unfavourable to passengers, can often serve as a cost saver for an airline because it will not need to pay compensation to its inconvenienced passengers.

New systems could drastically reduce the amount of luggage that goes missing and speed up its tracking and return. Many a time I have had to borrow one of the hon. member's suits and they seem to sag every once in a while, so I like to get some of my luggage back every once in a while. However, airlines are reluctant to invest in new technology. If the cost to the airlines for allowing bags to go missing or to get completely lost were to increase, then airlines would quickly improve their luggage handling systems.

The present situation encourages and rewards bad behaviour on the part of the airlines. Surely it is better to put in place a system that encourages and rewards good behaviour and that penalizes bad behaviour. This is also why we need a passenger bill of rights.

• (1810)

If airlines are required to generously compensate passengers for service shortcomings, this will selectively add extra expense to airlines with poor customer service records. All airlines these days are necessarily obsessing with cutting their operating costs. Currently, customer service is often seen as a cost, but if there is a potential penalty associated with poor customer service, then improving this will be part of their operation.

We, as fare-paying passengers, still have every right to expect service as promised without delay, cancellation or compromise no matter whether the airline is profitable or not. Consumers would not accept any compromise on safety and neither should they compromise on service. If an airline cannot afford to operate at a minimum standard of safety, it is not allowed to fly. Why should the same rule not apply to service?

This legislation is not suggesting that airline passengers receive extra rights above and beyond what is reasonable. Rather, consumers should have the same expectations as when buying other goods and services and if there is a problem, they will be fairly compensated, the same as all other consumers.

Adding an airline passenger bill of rights is not a precedent-setting new form of intrusion into the commercial relationship between a supplier and a purchaser of service. It simply creates some underlying basic principles of fairness in line with those already in place for most other consumer purchases and it is badly needed to fill a huge gap in our consumer rights.

The establishment of a passenger bill of rights will not require a new government department to manage or control it. All it does is establish a legal framework within which airlines are expected to operate and to specify minimum compensations levels which airlines must provide when they fail to provide their services as described and promised.

Airlines are still free to set their own pricing and policies any way they wish within the framework of the passenger bill of rights. Other

countries are already doing this. New legislation now in effect in the European Union obliges airlines to pay compensation for delayed or cancelled flights. This legislation took effect on February 17, 2005 and gives passengers cash compensation of £250, £400 or £600, depending on if the problem flight is under 950 miles, between 950 and 2,200 miles or over 2,200. That system is established. Compensation is awarded for delayed flights, cancelled flights, denied boarding or being bumped, as it is called, or for baggage problems. Additional compensation, such as meals during delays and overnight accommodations, can also be earned depending on the circumstances.

Assistance must be provided even when the delay is caused by a factor outside the airline's control, such as severe weather. Other issues are also covered. For example, if someone is downgraded from first class to coach class, the person receives compensation based on a specific formula.

One of Canada's airlines, Air Canada, is already operating under European laws on overseas flights. Two other airline providers have already adopted some of the proposed changes. WestJet and Porter Airlines do not overbook flights.

In conclusion, it is time that the power was put back in the hands of the consumers. Travellers have been at the mercy of airline carriers for too long. Canada has a chance now to borrow the best of existing measures and to create a world leadership role in air travel fairness.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the short time remaining, it is very important that the House recognize the work the government has done on this issue.

After having been in government for two short years, we introduced the flight rights Canada code of conduct for Canada's airlines. The previous government had 13 years to do something, but unfortunately the Liberals did nothing.

We consulted with stakeholders, the airlines and consumer groups because this issue is not only about consumers, their rights and their comfort on airlines, but it is also about the viability of the airline industry in Canada.

It is important that we truly consult with all stakeholders. These are not just punitive measures, measures that will hurt one sector. They will truly benefit not only the airlines, but all Canadians.

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With flight rights Canada we ensured that passengers have a right to information on flight times and schedule changes. We have ensured that passengers have a right to take the flight that they paid for. If a plane is overbooked or the flight is cancelled, the airline must find the passenger a seat on another flight operated by that airline, or buy the passenger a seat on another carrier. This is important and as I said, after two short years in government we introduced this and we are proud of it.

Passengers also have a right to punctuality. All of us in the House have travelled. Those members who have been in the House longer than others have travelled much more than some of the new members, but travelling is part of what Canadians do.

I am proud of the work we have done. We need to continue to work together, but we must consult all stakeholders on this matter.

● (1815)

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

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

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

[*English*]

INFRASTRUCTURE

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I asked the Minister of Transport a question a couple of weeks ago that was not well answered. In fact, his answer was very dismissive. I asked about the seven out of seven infrastructure projects that had been announced in British Columbia that were all in Conservative ridings and suggested there might be a bit of pork barrelling going on. The minister responded that it is not surprising to have all of the projects in Conservative ridings given how many Conservative ridings there are in British Columbia.

I would like to give the Minister of Transport an arithmetic lesson. Counting up the number of Conservative ridings, it is actually 61%. I hope that the minister is not someone who would get 61% on an examination, and go home and tell his parents and friends that he got 100%. There is a large gap between those two numbers and to justify all of the announced investments going into Conservative ridings on that completely misleading and fallacious basis is unacceptable.

Unfortunately, I am seeing in the House a decaying of the tone that we were setting. After prorogation, the Prime Minister appeared to have learned the lesson that this is a minority government that actually needs to work with its colleagues in the best interests of Canadians. There is an economic crisis that needs us to band together and think about why we are here as members of Parliament. We are not here to spend government money. We are here to serve taxpayers and think about their well-being.

I remind the Minister of Transport that the funds we spend are the taxpayers' funds. They are not the government's funds. As such, they have to be handled with the utmost transparency and integrity, not

with arrogance and duplicity. Unfortunately, the tone of cooperation that we saw in January has severely eroded. We are getting back to the kind of non-answers to questions that were so prevalent when I was first elected and, to my shock, found that this was a House where the government members could taunt rather than answer.

Not only do we have concerns about the targeting of infrastructure to Conservative ridings, we also have the situation of a \$3 billion fund that is being put aside. There is a complete and utter unwillingness to be accountable for that money. That is a betrayal of the trust of taxpayers and it is simply not acceptable. The Prime Minister and his team do not do justice to the trust the taxpayers and voters put in us. The basis of our democratic system is that trust. We need to rebuild it, not undermine it.

● (1820)

Mr. Brian Jean (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can tell the member that neither I nor any member Conservative government will take any lessons from a Liberal member on how to spend taxpayers' money. We know what taxpayers' money is and what it is for. It is for the benefit of Canadians, and we are going to make sure that Canadians get that benefit.

In fact, our government has demonstrated that we are committed to repairing and improving infrastructure from coast to coast to coast for all Canadians in all ridings. Budget 2009 invested an additional \$12 billion above and beyond our \$33 billion building Canada fund, the most for infrastructure revitalization this country has ever seen.

This infrastructure plan is helping provinces, territories and communities of all sizes stimulate their local economies, create jobs and support Canadians. That is our purpose in this House. We are entrusted with that, and we are taking care of that for Canadians.

This extra investment will actually provide \$4 billion for an infrastructure stimulus fund to help provinces and territories start projects as soon as possible; \$2 billion to accelerate construction at colleges and universities nationwide in all ridings; \$1 billion to create a green infrastructure fund, because we have listened to Canadians and green is important; \$500 million to support construction of new community recreational facilities under the program RInC for hockey arenas and things like that, which Canadians want; accelerating existing provincial and territorial based funding to all provinces so that they get the money today at their choice.

Recently Canada's Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, together with Ontario Minister George Smitherman announced over \$1 billion—that is right, \$3 billion—for almost 300 projects all across Ontario. These projects across the province will create jobs, will stimulate the economy and will improve the lives of all Canadians, especially Ontarians. It is great news for Canada.

Even more recently, Canada's Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway announced \$175 million for 41 projects across the member's own province, British Columbia. That is great news for the province of British Columbia. In fact, British Columbia's transportation and infrastructure minister, Kevin Falcon, had this to say about the announcement:

The B.C. Government has been working with the Government of Canada to get these dollars flowing quickly into communities across the province. Not only are these great projects important improvements to local infrastructure, they're an important stimulus to local economies, and it's estimated that this investment will create 1,750 direct and indirect jobs.

We understand that in these challenging times we need to act quickly, and we are acting quickly. We hope those members will support our stimulus plan and get the \$3 billion in emergency funding out quickly so that we can create jobs across this country, so we can support Canadians in their initiatives.

We all agree that we need to work co-operatively in order to get shovels in the ground, in order to cut red tape, in order to get money flowing to Canadians. That is what this Conservative government and the Prime Minister are doing.

It is time for that party over there to get on board and help this government create jobs, create stimulus and get a better quality of life for Canadians. This government is acting quickly, and now it is time for those members to show that they too can act quickly for Canadians.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, that self-congratulatory tone over there is a little rich considering it was our former leader who announced a major infrastructure spending program as a response to

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this recession at a time when the members opposite were still pretending that Canada was in a surplus situation.

We are all in agreement that infrastructure needs to flow. The Evergreen Line is a very good project for British Columbia, but I will remind the member opposite why there was not any press coverage of that announcement, or virtually none. It had been announced and reannounced so many times with no cheque ever being cut, just like so many other projects.

The tone of arrogance and hostility does not help in this House. I call on the members opposite to work co-operatively with the Liberal Party to serve the needs of Canadians.

● (1825)

Mr. Brian Jean: Mr. Speaker, it is rich coming from the member, because the reality is this is the government that funded the Evergreen Line. Yes, good news should be repeated. Canadians want to know what is going on with the economy, and we are getting it done.

It comes back to the same issue. Those members keep saying, “We are not going to let you have the \$3 billion in order to stimulate the economy”. That is Canadians' money. It is under the rules of this place and they are tight rules. This is not a blank cheque. We do not authorize blank cheques, and we could not even if we wanted to.

It is time to support this government and our initiatives to fix the economy in Canada, to cut red tape and to get it going. That member and the Liberal Party need to support us in that, because without that, our economy will be in shambles. We on this side of the House are not going to let that happen.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): 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 6:26 p.m.)

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