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Chair: The Honourable Anthony Rota



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• (1200)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (The Honourable Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the second meeting of the special committee on the COVID-19 pandemic.

[*English*]

Pursuant to the order of reference of Monday, April 20, the committee is meeting for the purpose of considering ministerial announcements and allowing members to present petitions and question ministers of the Crown, including the Prime Minister, in respect to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Normally, there would be a take-note debate after the questions to ministers; however, since the House has been recalled for later today, this debate will not take place.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting will be televised, just like a typical session in the House.

[*English*]

We will now proceed to presenting petitions for a period not exceeding 15 minutes.

I would like to remind members that any petition presented during the meeting of the special committee must have already been certified by the clerk of petitions.

[*Translation*]

Once their petition has been presented, we ask members to come and drop it off at the table.

[*English*]

There won't be a page coming to you. Please stay six feet away from the people who are at the table.

Presenting petitions, we have the honourable member for Kenora.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Mr. Chair, I'm happy to present a petition, which has been signed by hundreds of Canadians across 10 provinces and territories, calling on the government to take immediate action to improve rural broadband connectivity across Canada. Many Canadians in rural and remote regions of our country do not have access to reliable Internet, and the signatories to this petition believe that this is an issue of equality, as the Inter-

net is playing an increasingly vital role in all areas of life and not having access to it prevents people from participating in our economy.

Mr. Chair, this has become ever more apparent for those who are now attempting to work, take classes—

• (1205)

The Chair: We have a point of order. We're not getting translation or interpretation. English to French is not working.

I'll keep speaking in English. Let me know when you hear it in French. It's happening here as well. It's not just the virtual thing that we have translation problems with.

Okay. Everything is working now. Could the honourable member for Kenora start off either right from the beginning or halfway through, whichever he is more comfortable with?

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to say once again that I'm happy to present this petition, which has been signed by hundreds of Canadians across the country, calling for the government to take immediate action to improve rural broadband connectivity across Canada.

The signatories to this petition believe that this is an issue of equality, as many people do not have access to reliable Internet, particularly in rural and remote areas of the country, and this has made things increasingly difficult as our society and our economy become more and more virtual. This has become ever more apparent for those who are now attempting to work, take classes or access services from home during the current COVID-19 crisis.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Presenting petitions, we have Ms. May. I was reminded to use the names because we are in a committee setting, so I don't have to mention the ridings.

Ms. May, please.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): I don't know my own name anymore. I'm Saanich—Gulf Islands. Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I rise to present a petition in this committee meeting. It's from residents throughout Saanich—Gulf Islands who are calling for further work to pursue marine protected areas.

They note that the government goals are significant and the World Parks Congress has called for significant no-take zones within marine protected areas. Specifically, constituents of Saanich—Gulf Islands are concerned to see the continuation of what used to be called the Strait of Georgia marine protected area, now known as the Salish Sea marine protected area.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Does anyone else want to present a petition?

[*English*]

Seeing none, we'll now proceed to the questioning of ministers.

I would like to remind honourable members that no member shall be recognized for more than five minutes at a time and that members may split their time with one or more members by so indicating to the chair.

[*Translation*]

Please note that, given the rapid exchanges at this point in the meeting, we will suspend proceedings every 45 minutes to enable the employees providing support for the work of the session to replace each other in complete safety.

[*English*]

I also want to remind honourable members that the guidelines are that the length of the answer should reflect the length of the question, so try to stay within those guidelines. I'll be enforcing that as we proceed.

Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Chair, I want to again draw the Prime Minister's attention to a very serious issue affecting employers all across the country, especially one in my own riding, Brandt Tractor.

Many companies have acquired other businesses and are unable to show a 30% drop in revenues because of the extra revenue from companies that they have acquired. There are over 3,000 people who work for Brandt, including 600 people who work for the company that they acquired, who are all facing layoffs if Brandt cannot be eligible for the same wage subsidy that has been made available to other employers.

This is a technicality. Suggestions have been made to the federal government to allow for companies in the same situation to access this program.

I did ask the Prime Minister about this a week ago. I wonder if he could give me an update as to whether or not these types of criteria will be brought in to allow for more workers to stay on the job.

The Chair: The right honourable Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister): Mr. Chair, we moved forward quickly with measures to help as many Canadians as possible, workers who want to remain on the payroll with the Canada emergency wage subsidy, and also with the Canada emergency response benefit for people who have lost their paycheques.

We moved quickly on strong measures that would hit as many people as possible, but we recognize there are gaps. That's why we brought in modifications after conversations with the other parties to adjust the period of time within which people could apply for the CERB or the wage subsidy. We're also going to move forward on other measures as they come up.

I will continue to look into the issue that the honourable member has brought up in regard to the company in his riding.

• (1210)

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Mr. Chair, I do look forward to an update very quickly as it is the end of April and workers' jobs hang in the balance.

Provinces' plans to ease health restrictions are dependent on their ability to dramatically ramp up testing. Private companies have already created rapid blood tests that can provide results in under 20 minutes. These tests have been approved for use in Europe, Asia and in the U.S., but in Canada, they're still "under review".

Will the Prime Minister commit to fast-tracking the approval process so that provinces have access to the tests that they need?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, we are doing everything we can to ensure a fast, made-in-Canada response.

Thousands of Canadian businesses have applied to produce innovative medical equipment, including new test kits. As of yesterday, Health Canada has issued 113 new licences for medical devices, including 15 additional test kits.

Additional resources have been allocated to accelerate approvals, including recognizing or taking into account where approvals have been made elsewhere, but we will not compromise Canadian sovereignty or Canadian safety.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Mr. Chair, in March the Minister of Health signed an interim order to allow Health Canada to consider exactly that, other countries' approval of medical products. Recent reports, however, indicate that there are over 50 companies that are waiting for approvals to distribute test kits.

Has Health Canada issued any approvals under this interim order?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, as of yesterday Health Canada has approved 15 additional testing kits. We recognize how important testing is for the long-term reopening of the economy. We need to make sure that we have that capacity right across the country.

I salute the innovative Canadian businesses that have moved forward on solutions and look forward very much to seeing them come into place, but we cannot compromise Canadian safety. We have seen what happened elsewhere around the world when faulty test kits were relied upon. We need to make sure Canadians are safe.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: We are, of course, talking about an interim order that specifically allows Health Canada to look at other approvals granted by other organizations, like the European Union. Surely the Prime Minister would acknowledge the EU standards and the EU certification standards when there are Canadian companies manufacturing those test kits. Obviously, we're not talking about choosing between speed and effectiveness. Other countries have been able to impose and implement a fast-track system. Canada should be as well.

Mr. Chair, in 2018 a federal government document on pandemic planning advised that Canada's approach to dealing with pandemics should not be to follow the lead of the WHO but to make decisions based on Canadian expertise and intelligence. Can the Prime Minister explain why his government ignored that report?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: First of all, Mr. Chair, in regard to the first half of his question, we recognize how important it is to approve reliable testing quickly, but for made-in-Canada tests, it is unlikely that they got EU approval or U.S. approval before Canadian approval. We are going through all the steps necessary for those Canadian innovators as quickly as possible.

In regard to our approach to this, we have been following international safety standards every single day but making sure we are protecting Canadians with all the best information we have. We have been doing that since the public health officials gathered all our provincial health officials on January 2, and we will continue to.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Blanchet, the floor is yours.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet (Beloeil—Chambly, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon.

Government representatives and representatives from the political parties are simultaneously discussing the treatment that seniors must receive and the way that we are going to get out of this difficult situation, using wording that is specific enough for us to understand each other and broad enough for the requirements to follow naturally in the time we have.

Meanwhile, I want to go back to another issue, but I do not want it to be seen as casting doubt on anyone's good intentions. The banking industry, let's say, and the government, let's say, are somewhat close historically. However, the Prime Minister indicated yesterday that companies engaging in tax avoidance would not have access to government programs. I want to make sure that the meaning of that sentence is very clear, very specific, and very precise.

Am I correct to understand that the government is implementing clear measures and a clear tracking of companies engaged in tax avoidance, that they will be identified by name, and they will have no access to the emergency programs during the pandemic?

• (1215)

The Chair: The floor goes to the Right Honourable Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Companies engaged in tax avoidance and tax evasion face consequences in our system. That is ongoing, even during this time of pandemic. We are taking unprece-

ented steps to help Canadian workers to keep their jobs and to support them through this difficult time.

An audit process has been established for the extraordinary or unusual claims. At the same time, the fight against tax evasion continues to be a priority. Since 2015, we have made unprecedented investments in the Canada Revenue Agency in order to fight tax evasion and tax avoidance. Even during the pandemic, we will continue to ensure consequences for any company not paying its fair share of taxes.

The Chair: Mr. Blanchet, you have the floor..

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: Mr. Chair, there is a difference between tax evasion and tax avoidance.

Tax avoidance is legal under Canadian law, which is perhaps where the scandal lies. I want to be very specific. If a bank doing business in Canada is engaged in tax avoidance by positioning money overseas in order to pay less tax in Canada, would it be automatically excluded from the support programs during the pandemic?

The Chair: The Right Honourable Prime Minister has the floor.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We will still continue to deal very severely with those who do not pay their fair share of taxes. That is why, over the years, we have given more tools to the Canada Revenue Agency. We want to make sure that everyone pays their fair share of taxes.

Our priority, to help Canadians and to help workers, has been to give them the support they need, and that will continue.

The Chair: Mr. Blanchet, the floor is yours.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: If a bank wants to take advantage of the programs and is engaged in tax avoidance, is it excluded?

The Chair: The Right Honourable Prime Minister has the floor.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We are going to ensure that we support workers across the country who need help. At the same time, we are going to continue the fight against tax evasion and tax avoidance by ensuring that there will be consequences for all those who might wish to defraud the system.

The Chair: Mr. Blanchet, the floor is yours.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: I am not convinced that Canadians and Quebecers who are concerned about this are any more reassured.

Now I have another question for the Prime Minister.

Can we agree that the effects of this pandemic are being felt indiscriminately by everyone 65 years of age and older? In terms of the management of the pandemic, there is no difference between 65 and 75 years of age. Do we agree on that?

The Chair: The Right Honourable Prime Minister has the floor.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We recognize that, in general, seniors are the most vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. With the additional costs for the delivery of food and medication, those who do not have the money for the equipment they need and who are already struggling to pay their rent because of their low income will be facing greater challenges than those who are financially comfortable.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Singh.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, NDP): Mr. Chair, my question is very simple.

Will the Prime Minister commit to guarantee, as other countries have done, including France, Denmark and Poland, that if a company is registered in a tax haven, that company will not receive public support—yes or no?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, since 2015 we have made significant investments in the CRA to fight against tax avoidance and tax evasion. This is something we've taken very seriously as a country, and there will always be strong consequences for anyone who avoids paying their fair share of taxes.

At the same time, we've been investing to ensure that Canadians get the supports they need, regardless of whether they work for small or large companies.

• (1220)

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, I'm going to take that as a no.

I asked very clearly if a company that is registered in a tax haven will get help—yes or no—and we got an evasive answer. I'm going to ask again very clearly.

Other countries have done this. Poland has done it. Denmark has committed to it. France has committed to it. Very simply, if a company is cheating the public of paying its fair share by using legal tax havens, will this government commit today to say, “No, we will not give them public health money if they are cheating the public of contributing to our economy, to our society”?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The work we've done from the very beginning has been focused on helping Canadians: Canadians who work for small businesses, Canadians who work for large businesses, Canadians who work for franchises and Canadians who work for mom-and-pop shops. We know that COVID-19 has caused people across the country in different sectors, in different industries, to lose their paycheques. Our focus has been on making sure that people get the help they need to pay for groceries and to pay for their rent, regardless of the size of company they work for.

At the same time, we continue to be very severe on tax avoidance and tax evasion. We will continue to invest in the Canada Revenue Agency to make sure there are consequences for people who avoid paying their taxes.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: It seems as if the government is more concerned with students getting more help than they need, than the \$25 billion of lost revenue due to offshore tax havens. It seems more concerned about families receiving more help than they need, than about ensuring that companies such as Loblaws don't get away with not paying \$400 million in taxes. Why does the government take

this approach? It's so concerned about denying help to people who are in need, but it allows businesses to get away with not paying their fair share.

Why are the government's priorities so mixed up?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I'm sure the honourable member isn't suggesting that someone who works as a grocery clerk at Loblaws shouldn't get support from the government because of the behaviour of their head office. We will continue to pursue tax avoidance and tax evasion with all the tools of this government, because we take very seriously that everyone pays their fair share of taxes.

At the same time, we are going to continue to deliver significant help for students, for seniors and for workers right across the country.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Canada is losing billions of dollars each year because of tax havens. The government is going to have to pay Loblaws \$1.8 million because our tax rules allow companies to bypass the rules of the game. However, that does not concern the government. What concerns it is that students may be receiving too much money and staying at home. I don't know if the Prime Minister is aware, but \$2,000 per month barely covers basic needs.

Why is the government choosing to make life more complicated for students rather than attacking large companies who are exploiting our system?

The Chair: The Right Honourable Prime Minister has the floor.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: What concerns the government is ensuring that workers, students, and Canadians receive the assistance they need. That is what we are working on and that is why we have proposed emergency assistance for students.

But we did not stop there. We recognize that students need jobs. That is why we have improved the student summer jobs program and we are going to create 76,000 additional jobs for students. We are also going to recognize volunteerism, with sums from \$1,000 to \$5,000 for students. We are significantly increasing tuition fee assistance for students.

We are here to assist those in need. That is our priority. Our priority is substance, not politics.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to split my time with Monsieur Rayes.

Mr. Chair, the Prime Minister just said that it would be highly unlikely for a Canadian company to have received approvals in either the European Union or the U.S. for testing kits without having received approval here in Canada. I would like to draw his attention to a company called BTNX, which has been approved to sell their testing kits in the U.S. under section D of the FDA's "Policy for Diagnostic Tests for Coronavirus Disease-2019 During the Public Health Emergency". They are based in Markham.

Can the Prime Minister explain why BTNX has received approval in the U.S. under the FDA but is still waiting for Health Canada approval for testing kits?

• (1225)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I thank the member opposite for highlighting an excellent case of an innovative Canadian company that has moved forward with a world-class product. We will ensure that it goes through the proper expectations and qualifications in Canada, because we will not be giving up our sovereignty to the United States or to any other country. We will ensure that the products we approve in Canada are safe for Canadians. We have seen other countries take very different approaches that we would not recommend in Canada. We are going to ensure that, every step of the way, what we do is safe for Canadians.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Rayes, the floor is yours.

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Since this crisis started, we have been sensing some friction between the federal government and the provinces, more particularly Quebec.

On April 23, the Prime Minister and his Minister of Health hinted that seniors' residences could become a "national project in the long term", even making reference to the Canada Health Act. Then, on April 25, the Prime Minister tried to clarify his remarks by saying that he had no intention of becoming involved in areas of provincial jurisdiction. Given the current pandemic, I feel that the last thing we need is a constitutional crisis and a federal government trying to interfere in provincial responsibilities.

I would therefore like to allow the Prime Minister to tell us clearly that he has no intention of becoming involved in matters of provincial jurisdiction such as the health care system. I am specifically thinking about seniors. I am also thinking about the issue of residences and long-term care facilities, the CHSLDs, which is already complex enough to manage for the Government of Quebec.

The Chair: The floor goes to the Honourable Leader of the Government in the House of Commons.

The Honourable Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I feel that my colleague has been able to see from the beginning that the federal government has no intention of interfering in provincial responsibilities, but it does want to collaborate with all provinces.

This is particularly true in the case of Quebec, which is experiencing an extremely difficult situation. We only have to think about

our seniors and what is happening in the CHSLDs. We are collaborating with Quebec and I am in regular contact with a number of ministers. The Prime Minister, all my ministerial colleagues from Quebec and myself are speaking with our provincial counterparts and we are working together for the common good.

The Chair: Mr. Rayes, you have the floor.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, like a lot of other provinces, Quebec decided yesterday to progressively end the lockdown in order to support an economic recovery, while still complying with public health rules, great though that challenge may be.

However, for several days in his news conferences, the Prime Minister has seemed to question the decisions made by the Government of Quebec about the current lockdown.

Can he tell us today whether he agrees or does not agree with the plan proposed by the Government of Quebec?

The Chair: The Honourable Minister of Health has the floor.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health): Mr. Chair, I'm incredibly proud of the collaborative work of the provinces, territories and the federal government to come up with a shared set of guidelines that will help us ensure that as we move together—and obviously separately, given our own epidemiological situation and our own particular approach—we have a set of guidelines that will protect the health of all Canadians. I know that the Prime Minister worked very diligently with his counterparts, with all the provinces and territories, and we're thrilled that there is such collaboration across the country.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Rayes, you have 30 seconds for another question.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Great. I will ask my question once more, very simply.

I would like to know whether the federal government, or the Prime Minister himself, who speaks for it every day, agrees with the plan to end the lockdown that the Government of Quebec has put in place. Very simply, yes or no.

The Chair: The honourable minister has the floor.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think, as my counterpart indicates, these conversations are ongoing with the Prime Minister and his counterparts across the country. This is a collaborative process, and I am thrilled that we have a shared set of guidelines that all provinces have agreed to use to guide them in the safe practices as we move forward to reopen our economies. It's a delicate process. In fact, much of it is being developed at a local level because, of course, situations vary so greatly across the provinces and territories. Those guidelines that are in place will ensure that provinces and territories have a road map that will protect the health of Canadians.

The Chair: Ms. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Reports in the news about a surge in counterfeit personal protective equipment coming into Canada are deeply concerning to many Canadians.

Can Hon. Anita Anand advise us as to the extent of the problem?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of Public Services and Procurement): Mr. Chair, our priority is always to make sure that we have safe, effective equipment and supplies in the hands of our front-line health care workers.

Given the complexity of the global supply chain, ensuring the quality of the product is extremely important. We are working with established suppliers and distributors as well as quality assurance experts. We have strong processes in place to help ensure that the supplies we receive meet all necessary standards.

In addition, the Public Health Agency of Canada has robust testing measures in place. We must make sure that equipment is safe.

• (1230)

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to ask the minister how many shipments, or can she tell us who is ordering these supplies?

Hon. Anita Anand: The process we are following at Public Services and Procurement is that we are ordering based on orders that have come from the provinces based on what Public Health tells us they have requested.

The Chair: I'm going to stop the clock for a second.

I want to remind everyone that the length of the question should be reflected in the length of the answer. I know it's not always easy, but I wanted to point that out, so we are well aware of the guidelines we are using.

Ms. Block, please.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Can the minister tell us which companies are ordering these counterfeit supplies?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, as I said, we are engaged with a number of diverse suppliers internationally and domestically to ensure that our front-line health care workers have the supplies they need. We are engaged with rigorous quality assurance controls internationally and domestically.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much.

Can the minister at least tell us what measures are in place to ensure that Canada is only buying PPE from reputable sources?

Hon. Anita Anand: There are a number of points at which quality assurance is occurring, Mr. Chair. We are ensuring that manufacturers are required to certify that they are meeting specific standards. New controls by the Chinese government for international procurements require additional oversight, and PSPC is working closely with Public Health to make sure that there is quality assurance taking place right here in Canadian warehouses.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The CBSA has confirmed border agents have stopped shipments from coming into Canada that contain suspected fake PPE.

Can Minister Blair confirm how many shipments the CBSA has seized?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): I can tell you that the CBSA very vigorously checks the quality and the provenance of the protection equipment that is coming in. If it is determined that it is counterfeit and, therefore, in violation of the agreements, it is subject to seizure. I don't have the precise number of seizures that have been made, but I can assure the member opposite that the CBSA is very rigorous in ensuring that no counterfeit material is allowed into the country.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Can the minister advise us as to what measures are being taken to stop these shipments from coming to Canada?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned we are taking a number of measures to make sure quality assurance occurs in the country of origin with direct communication with the manufacturers and the on-the-ground logistic support that we have engaged from private corporations as well as the embassy in China. Then, once again, when the goods arrive in Canada, they are quality-tested by the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much.

Can the minister please advise us of what those measures are?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned, the Public Health Agency of Canada is taking extreme caution and extreme care to make sure that no defective goods are delivered to front-line health care workers. That is a process that we take very seriously because of our commitment to our front-line health care workers.

The Chair: Mr. Hallan.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The minimum \$5,000 income rule to qualify for CERB is cutting out Albertans who have struggled to find work because of the challenges facing the oil and gas industry.

Brenda is a constituent of mine who was laid off from her oil and gas job in 2018. She's been on EI from spring 2019 until earlier this year. As her EI doesn't count as income under the program, she doesn't qualify for CERB. She has been trying her best to find work, but like other former industry workers, she's had a tough time. The challenge of building pipelines, compounded with the current pandemic, has only made the job search harder.

Why is the government cutting out unemployed oil and gas workers like Brenda from receiving CERB?

• (1235)

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am very well aware of situations like that of the constituent the member speaks of, and I can assure him that, if Brenda's EI expired since December 29 of last year, recent regulatory changes to the CERB would qualify her, in fact, for the CERB.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Does the government have plans for helping oil and gas workers who have been out of work in recent years and whose job search has been made even harder because of COVID-19, yes or no?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs): Mr. Chair, we are very aware of the intense pressures that oil and gas workers are facing. Let me start by expressing the great sympathy that I think everyone in this House today feels for the people of Fort McMurray, who are facing a triple blow of a flood, the coronavirus and a deeply depressed price for oil.

When it comes to employing oil and gas workers, the support that our government has given directly for the cleanup of orphan wells, \$1.7 billion, is going to put a lot of people back to work very quickly.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: The minimum \$20,000 payroll requirement is disqualifying small family businesses and self-employed businesses. This includes hard-working truck drivers risking their lives to provide essential services, and they're being disqualified from receiving the CEBA loans. These are businesses that are most at risk from the current crisis.

Lisa is self-employed and runs a consultancy in my riding. She has worked hard to grow her business. She was planning to hire an

employee before COVID-19 and to finally draw a salary next month. Now with the pandemic, she is struggling to keep the doors open.

Why are self-employed business owners like Lisa disqualified from CEBA?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Mary Ng (Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade): I want to thank the honourable member for that very good question. To that employer and to that business owner, know that we are working with her and with many across the country. We have provided many supports for business owners like her. If she has seen a drop in revenue, she can access the wage subsidy.

One of the things I've heard a lot from business owners like the one you just described is the enormous expense of rent. We have just released support for rent, 75% for rent relief for those small businesses that have been severely hurt during this time. We will continue to work to support businesses like the one you just described.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: A family-run nail salon in my riding is struggling to stay open because of the pandemic. As they don't have any employees, they don't meet the \$20,000 payroll requirement for CEBA. Does the minister believe that small, family-run businesses like this nail salon are not being affected by the pandemic, yes or no?

Hon. Mary Ng: Having grown up in a business just like the one the honourable member described, I can assure you that business, like every business, is at the heart of the work that we do. We are very much concerned about that business and all businesses in this country. We will continue to listen. The work is not done, and we will continue to ensure that businesses all across the country, particularly those that are contributing so much to our communities, are indeed supported during this important and critical time.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Krista owns a massage clinic and the property it rests on. She was offered a loan from her bank but worries that she wouldn't be able to keep up with the interest payments, and on top of that the land tax, management fees and utilities. She would like to apply for a CEBA, but cannot because of the minimum \$20,000 payroll.

Again, why are small business owners like Krista ineligible for CEBA? Should we not lift the \$20,000 payroll requirement?

Hon. Mary Ng: Mr. Chair, I thank the honourable member for that important question.

The entrepreneur employer is at the very heart of all of our communities across the country. I don't think any of us could walk down our streets and not see a wonderful business like that. I want to assure those businesses that we continue to work, we continue to listen and we continue to find solutions.

One of the things that we have done to help businesses like this one is to make sure their costs are kept low. We've deferred payment for the GST and HST and customs duties for those types of businesses so that their costs are kept low during this difficult time.

• (1240)

The Chair: Mr. Williamson is next.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Mr. Chair, democratic governments around the world had to relearn a tough lesson concerning totalitarian regimes: A government that will lie to its own people will lie to the world.

Beijing's management of the coronavirus has been called a "Chernobyl moment" by scholars around the world, including our own Irwin Cotler.

Will the government join calls for an investigation of China's COVID-19 conduct, as Australia is asking for?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, let me start by saying that I defer to no one in my tremendous respect for Irwin Cotler, who, I think, is a moral authority recognized by all members of this House.

When it comes to reporting on the coronavirus in countries around the world, it is absolutely the case that we all help our own citizens and we help each other with candour and transparency. It is also the case that we need to work together.

Having said that, I think all members of this House will agree that a democracy will always be more transparent than any authoritarian regime.

Mr. John Williamson: Mr. Chair, Canada's ambassador to China, Dominic Barton, has lavished praise on Beijing's COVID-19 response.

Does the government share its ambassador's high opinion of China's response to COVID-19?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I began by saying that I think we share a high regard for Irwin Cotler, and let me say that I personally have a high regard for Ambassador Dominic Barton, who is the right man at the right place at the right time. Ambassador Barton is absolutely central to our procurement work in China today, and his extensive business experience is saving Canadian lives.

Mr. John Williamson: Grudgingly, it seems, the government is now open to reviewing the World Health Organization's response to COVID-19, but officials from this international agency have thus far refused to testify before the health committee.

Will the government join us in calling on WHO officials to testify before our House of Commons committee?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, there was nothing grudging at all in the very candid and important conversation our Minister of International Development, Karina Gould, had recently with Dr. Tedros of the WHO.

In that conversation she talked about the essential role the WHO plays as the only international organization that coordinates the world's health response, and we need that in a pandemic.

She also spoke about how important it will be to have a post-crisis review—

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Williamson.

Mr. John Williamson: Mr. Chair, Canada is grateful for Taiwan's donation of half a million surgical masks to Canada, to our country.

Is the government willing to support Taiwan's WHO membership as a condition of WHO reforms?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, Canada's one China policy is clear, and it has been the policy of successive Canadian governments. We continue to support Taiwan's meaningful participation in international multilateral organizations, where its presence is important. Taiwan's role as an observer in the WHO is very helpful.

Let me also point out that we participate together with Taiwan in APEC.

Mr. John Williamson: Mr. Chair, Canada's fish and seafood harvesters face unprecedented uncertainty. The fisheries minister has said it is up to each individual area to determine if fishermen want a delay or to stay on shore. While this promise has held true for harvesters from the minister's own riding, who are permitted to fish, the minister has refused to open up other lobster fisheries, including LFA 24, despite the fact fish harvesters voted in favour of going fishing on May 6.

Is the government aware that the fisheries minister is picking winners and losers by imposing a double standard on Canadian harvesters and adding to uncertainties in the Atlantic fishery?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: The Honourable Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food has the floor.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The decision to delay or close the fishery is made with the support of both the harvesters and the processors. After considering a variety of factors, including conservation and protection of stock as well as the health and safety of harvesters, our government is in constant communication with provincial and industrial partners to discuss these issues.

Mr. John Williamson: Mr. Chair, to go back to the Deputy Prime Minister, would the government prefer to see its one China policy under a democratic China or is it content to see a one China policy under the totalitarian regime?

The Chair: The honourable Deputy Prime Minister, in 15 seconds or less, please.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Well, since it's just 15 seconds or less, Mr. Chair, I think everyone in this House believes in democracy, and that is something we are working on and demonstrating in our debates today.

• (1245)

The Chair: Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Mr. Chair, on February 26, 2020, over a month after Canada's first COVID-19 case, the Minister of Health tabled the Public Health Agency's departmental results report in the House. The report stated that we optimized the national emergency strategic stockpile. In the 2019-20 departmental plan, which covers up to March 31 of this year, the plan said to enhance the national emergency strategic stockpile, yet the Minister of Health on April 1 said that the stockpile was not sufficient. Why?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, as we've talked about numerous times in this House, anticipating a global pandemic of this size was just a very difficult thing to do. As we saw the demand increase across Canada, of course we realized that the pandemic stockpile, which had been assembled over a number of years, was simply not going to be sufficient to meet the needs of health care workers across Canada. Provinces and territories were also struggling and, of course, we worked very closely with our counterparts to make sure that we could procure devices for health care workers across the country.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Chair, I will note that the report tabled in this very House this very year stated that they had optimized the stockpile, and yet they did not. The report which covered up to March 31 stated as well that they were to enhance it.

Is there a formula to determine how much equipment needs to be in the emergency stockpile?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, in fact, a national emergency stockpile was never meant to stockpile enough protective equipment for a pandemic of this size. In fact, it's there to provide back-up to provinces that may be having a provincial outbreak or a regional local outbreak in which they need support to augment the stockpile that they have at the provincial and territorial level. Having said that, of course we're reviewing now the national emergency stockpile's role in terms of protections for Canadians as we move forward.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Chair, in the government's own report, they said that they had optimized the amount in the stockpile. How do they determine what is optimized?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, the national emergency stockpile doesn't just hold personal protective equipment. In fact, it's not the majority of—

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Chair, in the government operations committee last week, the public works minister justified choosing Amazon to distribute PPE in Canada instead of Canada Post by saying that Amazon was not a foreign company and was in fact a Canadian company.

Would the minister advise the House of when Jeff Bezos took out Canadian citizenship?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, the intentions of my comments last week at committee were as follows. Amazon entered into an agreement with Canada. There's a Canadian operation of that company that is working with Purolator as well as Canada Post to ensure effective and efficient distribution to front-line health care workers, which is the priority of this government.

The Chair: We have a point of order from Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Chair, I believe the time for the response should be equivalent to the length of the question. Thank you.

The Chair: Yes, we are working on it, and we'll try to get that a little bit in line.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the very same committee, the public works deputy minister would state only that he expected that the contaminated and substandard PPE would be replaced at no charge to Canadian taxpayers. Will these contaminated and non-compliant masks be replaced 100% without one penny of added cost to Canadians?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, the corporation has assured us that they will not be charging us for the masks that were defective.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Chair, a spokesperson for PSPC then went on to state that the substandard N95 masks would not actually be replaced free of charge if we used them for other non-medical purposes.

Why would we pay suppliers in China full price for shoddy PPE and then use those items for non-medical purposes?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, there is still testing going on to see if those masks can be repurposed for non-medical purposes. This is a question that I will have to report back to the House on when that assessment is complete.

The Chair: Mr. McCauley, you have 15 seconds for a question and 15 seconds for an answer.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Chair, what is the non-medical use that the government is considering for these substandard masks?

• (1250)

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, a majority of the masks that were defective were defective in terms of their straps, and it's being determined whether those straps can be replaced and then repurposed.

The Chair: Mr. Melillo.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Mr. Chair, through you to the Minister of Small Business, I would like to note that many small businesses in the Kenora riding are in the tourism industry. This is normally a huge sector for our economy, especially in the coming summer months. Due to border closures and due to interprovincial travel recommendations, this sector will be hit very hard. Places like Temple Bay Lodge and Lac Seul's Golden Eagle Resort in my riding are going to be struggling.

Can the minister tell the House if the government is planning any support for the tourism industry?

Hon. Mary Ng: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the honourable member for that really important question. Those are certainly places where so many people have spent time enjoying those particular sites, which are extraordinary.

For those businesses in the tourism sector and in all sectors, we're helping them with the main measures. Whether it is to help keep their employees on staff or whether it is to help them with cash flow or to help them keep their expenses low, that is how we're helping them and we'll continue to do that.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Mr. Chair, many businesses, particularly seasonal operations, rely on programs like the Canada summer jobs, which they may face difficulty accessing if they are not able to open on time. Similarly the emergency wage subsidy disqualifies many seasonal businesses from being able to access it.

Will the time frames of these programs be extended to accommodate struggling seasonal businesses?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, I can confirm that, from the perspective of Canada summer jobs, the time frame has actually been extended to February 2021 for the reasons put forth by the member exactly.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I've heard from many business owners as well who are not eligible for some of the loans and programs, whether due to a financial threshold or being a new start-up or maybe that they can't demonstrate past revenue.

Will there be any flexibility for these start-ups and for some of these smaller companies that don't meet the current criteria?

Hon. Mary Ng: Mr. Chair, we have indeed put out support for those very companies that would need some additional support. Whether it's through the industrial research assistance program or the regional development agencies or through Futurpreneur for young entrepreneurs, in addition to the many measures we have put out, the idea here is to have comprehensive support to help all of our businesses, many of our businesses and entrepreneurs throughout the country.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Mr. Chair, many businesses in my riding are also facing challenges with Internet access. A lack of reliable Inter-

net has proven to be a barrier and this has been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Can the government tell us what steps it will take in order to rectify this and ensure that reliable Internet is available in all parts of Canada?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Mona Fortier (Minister of Middle Class Prosperity and Associate Minister of Finance): Mr. Chair, I thank the honourable member for his question on the issue of rural broadband in his region. We know that even before the COVID-19 crisis began, the government recognised that fast, reliable and affordable high-speed Internet is a necessity, not a luxury, for all Canadians, including those living in rural and remote communities.

Since 2015 we've helped connect more than 400,000 households to high-speed Internet, and we are going to continue to invest.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Mr. Chair, communities in northern Ontario have limited health care capacity, and they'd be devastated by a broad-spread outbreak of COVID-19. That is why I've joined local mayors, indigenous leaders as well as our provincial colleagues in calling for cottagers to stay home instead of coming to their secondary residences in my riding.

Nonetheless, as I've already mentioned, our economy is very dependent on this tourism. Is there going to be a plan from this government, coming out of this crisis, to continue to promote Canadian tourism and ensure that the sector will thrive going forward?

[Translation]

The Chair: The Honourable Minister of Canadian Heritage.

[English]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault (Minister of Canadian Heritage): Mr. Chair, we know that the tourism industry is hard hit by COVID-19, and we are working tirelessly to mitigate the impacts on the Canadian economy. Strong measures have been put in place, as one of my colleagues indicated earlier, for example, the Canada emergency response benefit or the Canada emergency wage subsidy.

We're also investing \$675 million in six of our regional agencies as well as \$287 million in the CFDC-CAE network to support small businesses in rural communities, particularly in the sector of tourism.

The Chair: We will now take a brief pause so that the console operators can switch.

[Translation]

The exchange has taken place, so let us move on.

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor now.

• (1255)

Ms. Andr anne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As the Bloc Qu b cois critic for seniors and the status of women, I would like to speak again today about the precarious financial situation of seniors.

In a brief submitted by FADOQ in 2019 to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, entitled "Challenges Facing Senior Women in Canada", FADOQ discussed the contemporary issues specific to senior women in Canada. Many of them outlive their life partners, have to live with little, have to be family caregivers in an aging population, and more. The current crisis is certainly not helping their situation, and nothing has yet been proposed to help them get through this crisis.

We have been asking the government for several months now to increase the old age pension by \$110 per month, to improve the guaranteed income supplement, accessible to all starting at age 65, to suspend the requirement to withdraw a portion of their pension plan investments, to designate private pension plans as preferred creditors and to lower drug prices.

It's not a luxury for these senior women, but a necessity. Doesn't the government agree?

It's high time we took action for our seniors.

The Chair: The hon. minister has the floor.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

After a lifetime of hard work, Canadians deserve peace of mind in retirement. We are ensuring that Canada pension plan and old age security payments continue and that new applications are processed as quickly as possible.

We have introduced new measures during this crisis, including offering an additional GST/HST credit of \$400 per adult, on average, and \$600 per couple. We are also reducing the minimum withdrawals from registered retirement income funds by 25%, and allowing people to defer paying tax until August 31.

We will continue to explore other ways to support Canada's seniors and retirees.

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, you have the floor.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The extra GST credit payment, the 25% reduction and all that is good, but it's not enough.

On another note, the government is helping the community sector in times of crisis, because it helps to lighten its burden, but then it creates needs that will have to be met by the provinces and Quebec. These various groups come under the health and social services ministries in the provinces and Quebec. They are affected by the crisis and need stable, recurring support. They can't afford to beg every year. The needs are great, and some programs are coming to an end.

Will the government finally commit to the governments of Quebec and the provinces to make community funding stable and predictable, in particular by increasing the Canada social transfer, or CST, by 6%?

The Chair: The hon. Minister of Health has the floor.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I share the member's passion for the work that charity groups and not-for-profit organizations do across this country. That's why we've set up a \$350-million emergency community support fund that will support charities and not-for-profit organizations in their important work. We also made sure that they are eligible for the 75% wage subsidy.

We've also contributed directly through things like Kids Help Phone and United Way. These are really important organizations that, as the member points out, are the fabric of our community. We are grateful to partner with them during this difficult time.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, you have the floor.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: The crisis fund and the wage subsidy are good, but I'm also talking about the post-crisis period. Seniors are also the most affected by the virus. That can be seen everywhere. Public health officials in the provinces are working miracles, given the situation. Health care is already underfunded, in part because the federal government isn't giving back to the provinces enough of the taxes our constituents pay.

Does the government intend to make a commitment, as the Bloc Qu b cois and the premiers of all provinces and Quebec asked for last December, to increase and index health transfers?

The Chair: The honourable Minister of Health has the floor.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, to help the provinces and territories with the surge of health activity during this pandemic, we increased funding by \$500 million to ensure that they would be able to have the supports and services necessary across their communities. This funding is in addition to the \$40 billion that we already provide to provinces and territories each year.

We're going to continue to work with provinces and territories to assess how this money is supporting them and what other supports we can provide as they adjust to the new normal with COVID.

• (1300)

[Translation]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Perron.

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinong , BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question has to do with agriculture.

The situation is critical. At the moment, vegetable producers have to make business decisions: should they plant vegetables or should they plant soybeans because they're afraid they won't have the labour needed to harvest them?

The government can take concrete, simple measures, including insuring crops against risks. The government needs to tell producers that they can plant their fields and that it will be there for them.

Can we get a formal commitment today?

The Chair: The honourable minister has the floor.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, I appreciate my colleague's co-operation in finding solutions. It's true that our producers are making decisions right now. That's why we are working closely with their representatives on a regular basis, I would say even every day. We are also in discussions with producers to find the best ways to help them, in addition to the mechanisms already available to them.

Let me remind you that we have invested an additional \$5 billion in Farm Credit Canada. We are helping producers to bring in foreign workers by giving \$1,500 per worker.

The Chair: Mr. Perron, you have the floor.

Mr. Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I understand that we were given answers like this last week or two weeks ago, but now is the time to act. I talk to farmers every day. People in the fields need answers and firm commitments.

I'm hearing about the amount of money invested in Farm Credit Canada, but it's still debt. Farm businesses are already heavily in debt. It takes an injection of capital without increasing their debt load.

As far as foreign workers are concerned, there are plenty of other measures, but now an announcement about crop insurance is needed. There would be a way to do that permanently with the AgriStability program. An emergency fund could also be set up right away.

I'll rephrase my question: When are we going to have an announcement about this?

The Chair: The honourable minister has the floor.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, yes, there is a whole range of risk management programs, including the AgriStability program, which provides coverage for loss of income, and the crop insurance program. All these programs are administered in co-operation with the provinces. I assure you that we are working very closely with the provinces to find the best mechanisms to support our producers quickly.

The Chair: Mr. Perron, you have the floor.

Mr. Yves Perron: Mr. Chair, there are simple things that can be done, including speeding up the processing of visa applications for foreign workers, automatically renewing the permits of workers who are already here and giving them an open permit so that they can work anywhere, and introduce a financial incentive to encourage workers to work on farms. That's what we've been talking about today in our proposal; we talked about it in the press briefing this morning.

There isn't just a sense of urgency in the fields and on our land, but also of distress. People need reassurance. We seem to forget that agricultural entrepreneurs—that's how I describe them—are the ones who are assessing the risks as we speak. If they let their vegetables rot in the field, they have no guarantee that someone will support them. If they have to let their vegetables rot in the field because they don't have the labour to harvest them, they have no guarantee that someone will support them.

We need a formal commitment. I'm not the only one saying there's an agricultural emergency: everyone says so. Dr. Charlebois of Dalhousie University says that we're losing 5% to 7% of our farms every year. Imagine the loss in the time of COVID-19. We're going to wake up in the fall, and there will be a shortfall in the markets and inflation. The time to act is now.

The Chair: The honourable minister has the floor.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, I want to assure my colleague that discussions and work continue day and night with industry partners, producers, processors and the provinces.

Programs already exist. I know that producers want the AgriStability program to be more generous, but it already exists. They already have access to advance payments under this program. As well, there are various provincial initiatives that have been implemented, which are 60% funded by the federal government and 40% by the provinces. Multiple initiatives have already been put in place.

I would remind you that the federal government transfers funds to the provinces, which can then enhance the wages of essential workers, including those in the food sector. In fact, that's what the Government of Quebec has done by offering a wage increase to workers in those two categories. Workers in the food sector benefit from both programs.

● (1305)

The Chair: I would like to remind members that they must address the chair during their questions and comments.

[English]

We will move to Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Chair, I am so proud of how Canadians have come together with incredible determination and solidarity. It's our role in Parliament to help them with what they need, because whether it was a crisis in long-term care or the fact that we didn't have the PPE for our front-line workers, Canadians weren't prepared. Canada was not prepared. We can never leave them in that position again.

I would say to the Minister of Middle Class Prosperity that it became clear within a week of COVID-19 that millions of Canadians did not have enough savings to pay their rent. What commitment is the government going to make to work with the New Democrats to ensure that Canadian workers and families are never ever again left in such a precarious financial position?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Mr. Chair, I can tell you that since day one we have been working hard to develop an economic response plan to help all Canadians, all workers and businesses to be able to go through this pandemic. We will continue to support all Canadians so they can put food on their table and pay their bills.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Chair, I really appreciate that answer. The question I am asking, though, is where do we go from here?

I ask because it's not the billionaires who have stepped up, but the personal support workers and the grocery store clerks and the cleaners working for 14 bucks an hour who have put themselves on the line, and there is no going back to that old normal.

What steps will we take? Is \$2,000 a month the new baseline to ensure financial security for workers across this country, and will the federal government play a role in ensuring that this is the new baseline?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Mr. Chair, our top priority since the beginning has always been the health and welfare of Canadians.

As you probably have seen, we have developed an economic response that will help Canadian workers and businesses. The Canada emergency response benefit helps Canadians across the country to pay their bills during this unprecedented time. We will continue to find other programs to support Canadians through this very difficult time.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Chair, there is one way we could help, because families in the rural north are doing their part to flatten the curve. They are at home with their children, who are getting schooled online and working at home; yet if you're living in a rural area, you're getting hosed and fleeced by companies like Bell.

I have a family who got a bill for \$650 a month. I have another family who have to drive into town to the Tim Hortons so their kids can sit in a car and do their homework.

Everybody has to step up in the age of COVID, and that includes corporations. What steps will the government take to make the telecom carriers like Bell play their part and stop fleecing rural northern families?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, first of all, as we have discussed already this afternoon, improved Internet access for Canadians in remote northern rural communities is absolutely a priority. It's been a priority of our government from before this crisis, and the member opposite is entirely right that the crisis has underscored the importance of rural broadband access for children and their parents.

When it comes to corporate responsibility in this crisis, I agree with the member opposite. We all have to do our part. I think we're seeing essential workers, many of them very poorly paid, acting heroically every day and we expect corporate Canada to step up too.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you. I really appreciate that answer. I look forward to the next steps to make sure that corporate Canada, when it comes to rural telecom, helps out.

First nation communities are doing an enormous amount of work to protect their people from COVID-19, but in the far north where we have many communities with overcrowded homes and poor medical service, the only tool they have is the complete lockdown and shutdown of their communities.

They are keeping their communities safe, but the economic impact of that is devastating for small air carriers and airports like the one at Moosonee that service community regions like Treaty 9.

The beating of COVID-19 cannot include the loss of air service across the north from bankruptcy. Therefore, what steps will the minister take to ensure that coming out of COVID-19 our air transport into the northern indigenous communities remains strong?

Hon. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Sœurs, Lib.): Mr. Chair, that is a very important question. We know the essential service nature of air travel into remote and indigenous communities, particularly 96 first nation communities and 50 more Inuit communities.

This is something the government has moved quite swiftly to address by assuring financial stability, funding the territories with, in the case of Yukon, \$3.6 million in emergency funding for the airlines, \$8.7 million for the Northwest Territories and \$5 million for Nunavut.

This is something we will continue to do. With respect to first nations in fly-in communities, we are working actively to bridge that gap because we know the nature of that essential service.

• (1310)

The Chair: Mrs. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Chair, tests that are manufactured in Canada for COVID-19 antibodies are being exported to and approved in other G7 countries, but the government won't allow them to be used here. Why not?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I am so proud of Health Canada and the civil servants who have worked so hard to expedite approval of test kits for use in Canada. In fact, we've gone from an average of a six-month timeline for approval of test kits to a timeline of one to seven days. We are working diligently to make sure that all of the tests being sought for use in Canada receive the appropriate Health Canada authority.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chair, testing for COVID-19 antibodies shows how many people have already had the virus and recovered.

Why doesn't the government want Canadians to know if they've already had the virus?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I reject the premise of that question. In fact, we're so proud of our academics and scientists here in Canada who have come together to form a serological survey consortium, which is actually going to allow us to have a better understanding of the exposure of COVID-19 in Canada and of Canadians' relative immunity.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chair, other G7 countries are testing for COVID-19 antibodies. Why isn't Canada?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, underlying that question may be an indication that the member doesn't understand the most recent science, which is that we don't understand a lot yet about the immunity of COVID-19. We know that people who have been exposed do have some antibodies, but what is unclear as of yet is what kind of immunity that gives them.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chair, Canadians want to get safely back to work. Why won't the government allow testing for COVID-19 antibodies so Canadians can get back to work safely? They're using the same tests that are being tested here in other countries and they're being allowed to go back to work in other countries.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I'm not sure what information the member is pulling from, but I will tell you right now that the question of how we protect people in the workforce is of paramount importance not just to the government, but to the workers, their families and the sectors that employ them. We only have to look at sectors in our own country that have been hard hit. There is no easy answer, but I will tell you that we're working diligently with all sectors to answer that very question.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chair, why won't the government waive its 18% tariff on masks until domestic production meets pre-COVID-19 price points?

Hon. Mary Ng: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the honourable member for that really important question.

Canada, along with other like-minded countries, has committed to making sure that our supply chains, particularly for medical equipment and supplies, remain open so that these important supplies get into the hands of our respective governments and people.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chair, how many pairs of surgical gloves will be produced daily in Canada as of May 1 of this year?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, there are numerous items of PPE being produced in Canada at the current time: reagent, face shields,

hand sanitizer, gowns and vents. We have complementary supply chains from international markets as well as domestic markets.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chair, are any surgical gloves in production in Canada right now?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, as I said, we have complementary supply chains operating at the same time in order to keep Canadian health care workers safe.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chair, when does the government expect to have enough surgical gloves for professional health-related practitioners to get back to work?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, I can confirm that we have ordered one billion nitrile gloves and we have received over 12 million pairs of such gloves for delivery to front-line health care workers.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chair, two government planes returned to Canada from China to get PPE. They returned to Canada empty, yet a telecoms company was able to get 1.5 million masks. Why is that?

• (1315)

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, I can confirm that we've had 16 flights return to Canada filled with cargo. There was one flight that returned without federal cargo, but the flight did have other cargo on board.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We now go to Mr. Gourde.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yesterday, we learned that in March, the Liberal government gave assurances to parliamentarians that the Canada–U.S.–Mexico Agreement wouldn't come into force until August 1, 2020. We now know that the agreement will come into force on July 1, 2020.

Does the Deputy Prime Minister deny that she gave assurances to parliamentarians about the effective date of the Canada–U.S.–Mexico Agreement?

The Chair: The honourable Deputy Prime Minister has the floor.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, the new NAFTA is the result of three years of hard work for all Canadians.

We all came together as a country throughout the negotiations. The result is excellent for Canada, especially since today there are major issues around the global economy and protectionism. This is good news for our country.

The Chair: Mr. Gourde has the floor.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, as the Deputy Prime Minister knows, the dairy industry will face significant financial losses if the agreement comes into force on July 1, 2020, rather than August 1, 2020.

Why has this government broken its commitment to August 1 as the effective date of the Canada–U.S.–Mexico Agreement?

The Chair: The honourable Deputy Prime Minister has the floor.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I would like to tell the honourable member and all members here that, in the context of a global economic crisis worse than the Great Depression, the conclusion of a free trade agreement with the United States is an excellent success for Canada.

The Chair: Mr. Gourde, you have the floor.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, the new guidelines for the Canada summer jobs program, which consist of 100% funding for student salaries without increasing the program's financial resources, will limit the number of jobs for students this summer. Reinvesting in the Canada summer jobs program will allow more students to gain invaluable work experience for the future.

Does the government agree to double the budget of the Canada summer jobs program?

The Chair: The honourable minister has the floor.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, we haven't reduced the number of jobs available through the Canada summer jobs program because we still have the budget to fund all salaries fully. A week ago, we announced the creation of 116,000 jobs through other student employment programs. Of course, we will continue to evaluate our programs to create more jobs.

The Chair: Mr. Gourde has the floor.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, the Canada emergency student benefit, with an unlimited budget in terms of the number of recipients, is likely to encourage hundreds of thousands of students to remain at home this summer without jobs. As a result, they won't gain valuable work experience for their future careers. Businesses across the country will lack the human resources needed to get the Canadian economy moving again during this crucial period.

Is the government prepared to consider changes to its program?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, I can assure everyone in the House that we're working with all parties to make sure that we do not disincentivize work. Quite frankly, students want to work. They want to contribute. They want to serve. They want to work in their communities. We are doing whatever we can to make sure, through the creation of the student benefit and also through the creation of 116,000 extra jobs, that they have every opportunity to do so.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Gourde has time to ask a very brief question.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, the shortage of temporary foreign workers this summer could be offset by the availability of Canadian students. However, work incentives are missing from the

new Canada emergency student benefit. Our food sovereignty will be at risk in the coming months if this situation persists.

Is the government prepared to change the Canada emergency student benefit to encourage students to work on Canadian farms?

• (1320)

The Chair: The honourable minister has a maximum of 30 seconds to respond.

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, we are looking at ways to ensure that we create incentivized opportunities, particularly in the essential areas like agriculture, for our students.

The Chair: Mr. Chiu.

Mr. Kenny Chiu (Steveston—Richmond East, CPC): Mr. Chair, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute is a non-partisan think tank that champions the values that led to the creation of Canada and its emergence as one of the world's leading democracies, a place where people may live in peace and freedom under the rule of law. On April 19, the Chinese embassy issued a statement condemning the MLI for its publication.

Will the government stand up for Canada and its values against such unreasonable assertions by the Chinese Communist Party?

The Chair: The honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, this government will always stand up for Canada. This government will always stand up for free speech and freedom of expression in Canada.

Let me say that I personally hold the Macdonald-Laurier Institute in very high regard. I think I've given a speech there. It's a great group.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Mr. Chair, I'm willing to share 30 seconds of my time for the member opposite to highlight how they are going to do that.

The Chair: The honourable Deputy Prime Minister, in 30 seconds or less.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I think I just did, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Mr. Chair, in my humble opinion, she didn't. Anyway, let's switch to another question.

WHO officials believe countries were given much time to implement protective measures before its official pandemic declaration in mid-March, and that countries like Canada should not have waited for the declaration to act, given the damage was so apparent in China. However, the Canadian government insisted on delaying a practical response to protect Canadians and relied on the WHO to make their decisions.

Why did this government not act sooner to protect Canadians?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The premise that underlies that question is quite frankly incorrect. In fact, in early January, Dr. Tam convened the first of our daily calls to discuss the ongoing outbreak in China and what that might represent for Canada. She also immediately convened the special advisory committee of chief public health officers across the provinces and territories to begin planning for what potentially could become an outbreak in Canada. We also took additional screening measures at the borders, increasingly adding countries as the pandemic grew.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Mr. Chair, the Government of China has revised the death toll in Wuhan by increasing it by 50%. The health minister says she trusts the data coming out of China. Does she believe the data was right before or after the revision?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I will point to the fact that data has been a challenge amongst all countries in this outbreak. In fact, the speed at which infections have occurred and the intensity of the outbreaks in many countries, including some of our closest allies and partners—like Italy, Germany, Spain and the United States—have demonstrated that data is very difficult to gather when you're in the middle of an outbreak.

I know that the World Health Organization—as are many other international organizations—is reviewing the data that's coming out of countries. I will tell you that I'm firmly focused on—

The Chair: Mr. Chiu.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Taiwan has previously held an observer status in the WHO under the name “Chinese Taipei” but was unjustly removed due to the influence of the CCP, the Chinese Communist Party, following its strong response to COVID-19.

Will this Government of Canada acknowledge Taiwan's invaluable contribution to the global community and support it in obtaining observer status independently again?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, yes, indeed, Canada believes that Taiwan's role as an observer in the WHO assembly meetings is in the interest of the international health community and is important to the global fight against pandemic and disease. We have experience working with Taiwan as an economy in APEC, where Canada participates as well.

The Chair: Mr. Chiu, a very brief question, please.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: All right. Just to follow up, the public officials in Canada have issued praise for China's swift response to COVID-19. What does our government believe it should learn for future crises from China and its response?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much.

The extent to which China tried to contain the outbreak from spreading to other countries was noted by public health officials across the world as extraordinary. I think there is lots to learn from all countries. In fact, I think one of the lessons learned for all countries is that we can never let our guard down again and we will have to work even more closely and more collaboratively internationally to prevent future outbreaks.

• (1325)

The Chair: Mr. O'Toole.

Hon. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Mr. Chair, it's good to see our parliamentary democracy back in action.

The government is spending billions of dollars in this health and economic crisis. Much of that is needed to preserve jobs and help Canadians, but much of the support has been too slow and has made the economic crisis worse.

One group of Canadians missed entirely is our seniors. They're on fixed incomes. They're our most vulnerable. They're unable to work, and they've seen skyrocketing prices for drugs and food.

Why did the government choose to give billions of dollars to groups that may help seniors rather than an immediate OAS supplement to help them immediately?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We recognize that OAS and the GIS are an important part of the retirement income of Canadians, particularly lower-income and rural seniors. Our government is committed to ensuring that during this COVID-19 pandemic seniors will continue to receive without interruption the benefits to which they are entitled. We are looking into the ways in which we can support seniors during this very difficult time, and we are also working with partners to help deliver services on the ground.

[Translation]

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Mr. Chair, a few weeks ago, the Prime Minister confirmed the temporary closure of our country's borders, including Roxham Road. However, he recently allowed illegal crossings to resume.

A border closed for national security purposes must be 100% closed. It can't be closed halfway. The government made a choice that flies in the face of the public health of Canadians. The government made an ideological choice.

When will the Prime Minister close our border for real?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Unfortunately, in the question the member opposite is simply misinformed. In fact, we implemented very strict reciprocal arrangements with the United States to turn back all irregular migrants crossing our border during this particular medical crisis. During the month of April, not a single person crossed, for example, at Roxham Road.

I believe what the member is referring to is the application of the safe third country agreement, an agreement that has been in place between Canada and the United States since 2004, and its application at points of entry. No one has entered this country illegally at all during any point in time since the implementation of these new measures.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Mr. Chair, the minister just said that we're going to stop illegal crossings just for this health crisis. Will he confirm to the House that after the planking of the curve, they will immediately allow the illegal crossings to continue?

Hon. Bill Blair: Let me be very clear. What I said was that we have stopped all irregular crossings at our border during this period of time—and as well non-essential travel—to ensure the safety of Canadians. Those measures have been put in place and they have been very effective throughout this, and we have undertaken, through our agreement with the United States, to continue these measures until they are no longer required.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Mr. Chair, I will let Minister Blair take the time between now and the next sitting to review his first answer and compare it to his second answer.

Thousands of small businesses and farms across the country have been asking their MP to increase the Canada summer jobs. In fact, the Prime Minister suggested there would be more, yet they didn't give any more budget to any of the MPs. They announced \$9 billion, Mr. Chair, for students to stay home. Here's a proposal for team Canada: Cut that in half to \$4.5 billion. You can have over 400,000 summer jobs for essential services, for farms where students will work, and you can still give them \$1,000 tuition credit for half of the cost of their \$9-billion plan.

When will they step up, as they did with the wage subsidy when they realized they got it wrong the first time, and heed our advice to fix it now?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I thank the member for his question, Mr. Chair.

Our student measures include income support, increased job creation, tuition and Canada student loan enhancement, as well as an opportunity for students to serve. This is what we've heard from student organizations and students across the country. We are not disincentivizing work. We are ensuring that students can pay their bills and can actually continue on with their studies in the fall.

With respect to Canada summer jobs, we're creating 70,000 jobs. Last week we added another 76,000 or 116,000, depending on whether you include opportunities to study. We're going to look at what else we can do for students.

• (1330)

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Perron.

Mr. Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll share my time with my colleague, the member for Shefford.

It seems difficult to obtain new commitments for the farming community today. I'll give the government the opportunity to easily follow up on the existing commitments. We heard earlier that the Canada-United States-Mexico agreement, or CUSMA, would come into force starting in July rather than in August. This will mean further financial losses. With regard to the compensation for which agreements have been made with certain sectors, but that hasn't been provided yet, can the government commit to making these payments soon?

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC)): The honourable Minister of Agriculture.

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Perron, I want to reassure you that we're absolutely upholding our commitments to various supply-managed sectors. As you know, we committed to allocating \$1.75 billion to the dairy sector, and the first installment has already been paid. With regard to poultry and eggs, COVID-19 has caused a setback, to say the least. However, I want to assure you that our commitment still stands and that discussions will start again as soon as the situation returns to normal.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Perron.

Mr. Yves Perron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A number of things can be done to support the farming community. In particular, proposals have been made to increase the credit capacity of the Canadian Dairy Commission so that less milk is thrown out. There are also discussions about implementing a cattle set-aside program, as proposed by the beef producers from the Canadian Cattlemen's Association. COVID-19 is resulting in lower production in slaughterhouses across the country.

Where do things stand on these two issues and when can we expect an announcement in this regard?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The Minister of Agriculture.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We're very supportive of the potential credit increase for the Canadian Dairy Commission, but this would require an amendment to the regulations. The discussion on this issue is ongoing.

Regarding our other commitments, I want to assure you once again that we're continuing our discussions with the various industry representatives to provide the best possible support, given their specific needs and circumstances. I'm thinking in particular of the beef sector.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Since Mr. Perron was sharing his time, I'll now give the floor to Ms. Larouche, the member for Shefford.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to come back to the subject of our seniors. Not all seniors live in a CHSLD or in a luxury private residence. Many are still living at home, but are having trouble making ends meet. The percentage spent on housing far exceeds the recommended maximum of 30% of the personal budget. The cost of groceries is increasing, along with the cost of medication, not to mention the costs that seniors incur by paying other people to carry out tasks that they can no longer do on their own for various reasons.

This shows that seniors also have expenses in times of crisis. The \$110 monthly increase in the old age security pension starting at age 65 would help seniors. They're entitled to decent housing, whether they live in community, social or affordable housing. The signature of an agreement between the federal government and the Government of Quebec on housing would probably help many people in these times of crisis.

Does the government plan to make some concessions so that Quebec can also access the national housing strategy funding, if that funding is still available? Our seniors have the right to age with dignity without going broke.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Middle Class Prosperity.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Mr. Chair, I greatly appreciate my honourable colleague's question.

Seniors and pensioners need more services and support during this COVID-19 pandemic. I want to remind seniors that we're here and that they won't be alone during this crisis.

I said earlier that we're helping to protect the financial security of seniors through a number of measures. However, I also want to emphasize that we're helping seniors obtain essential services and items such as groceries.

We've invested half a billion dollars to help seniors in this time of crisis. We've invested \$350 million in charitable and not-for-profit organizations; \$9 million in the United Way of Canada; and \$100 million in food banks and local food organizations. We previously invested \$50 million in projects under the new horizons for seniors program.

I can expand on this if there are further questions.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We have time for a brief question.

Ms. Larouche, do you have a second very brief question?

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Help from organizations is fine. However, seniors also need money that goes directly to them. We're asking for a \$110 monthly increase in the pension starting at age 65 to avoid creating two classes of seniors.

• (1335)

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Middle Class Prosperity.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We're taking concrete steps to ensure that the Canada pension plan and old age security benefits on which seniors rely continue to reach them without delay and that new applications will be processed as quickly as possible.

We'll work with all levels of government to ensure that seniors have the support that they need.

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Resuming questions, the honourable member for Ch ateauguay—Lacolle, Madam Shanahan.

[Translation]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Ch ateauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be sharing my time with the honourable member for Vimy.

I'm very proud and impressed by the efforts made and the goodwill shown by farmers across Canada and, of course, by the farmers in my constituency, Ch ateauguay—Lacolle, during the COVID-19 crisis.

A large part of my constituency is located in what we call the "gardens of Quebec," where we find the renowned black earth of the Jardins-de-Napierville.

Since the start of this crisis, I've also had the privilege of seeing the dedication of our producers and of being able to refer their questions and concerns to the government with regard to the arrival of temporary foreign workers, the additional costs generated by the mandatory isolation of these workers and the risk of launching agricultural production in the middle of this crisis.

Can the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food tell us about the measures implemented by our government to support our producers for the 2020 season and, at the same time, to ensure local production and food security for all Canadians?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable minister.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We know the extent to which foreign agricultural workers are essential to the country's food security. I want to reassure all Canadians that very significant measures have been implemented to ensure that these workers aren't vectors for spreading COVID-19.

First, we're making sure that the workers are symptom-free before they leave their country. When they arrive in Canada, they're brought by private transportation to their place of residence. The employers are responsible for giving them proper housing so that they can comply with all the rules of the strict 14-day isolation period. To help employers provide these services, we're giving them a lump-sum of \$1,500 per foreign worker.

I can assure you that we're stepping up our efforts to help the food sector meet its labour needs and that we're providing some financial support to the sector.

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We go to honourable member Madam Koutrakis.

[Translation]

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm pleased to be back in the House. I want to thank the people of Vimy for their patience and co-operation during this pandemic and to assure them that we'll get through it together.

[English]

I'm very pleased that the government has mobilized Canadian industry in this war against COVID-19, as we did during the world wars. Several biotech companies in my own riding have joined the battle. I thank them for responding to the call to action.

Given the critical importance of medical equipment, supplies and tests, can the Minister of Public Services and Procurement comment on our progress in mobilizing Canadian industry to meet domestic demand and even the export of these life-saving products as a means of fighting the coronavirus? What business and employment opportunities do these mobilization efforts create for Canadians?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We go to the honourable Minister of Public Services and Procurement, Ms. Anand.

[Translation]

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank my colleague. The industry and suppliers have really stepped up to the plate. A team of procurement specialists is actively assessing the responses as they come in.

[English]

Canadian business has totally stepped up. We have seen Canadian businesses from across the country motivated to produce domestic supply right here at home. Whether we're talking about Stanfield's in Nova Scotia, Medicom in Quebec, Spartan in Ottawa, Thornhill Medical in Toronto or Fluid Energy in Alberta, Canadian businesses from coast to coast to coast are stepping up to make sure that Canadian front-line health care workers have the PPE and other equipment they need to keep Canadians safe.

• (1340)

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We have time for a brief question. Ms. Koutrakis, you have about 15 seconds.

[English]

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Does the minister agree that if we were fully self-sufficient, it would take the pressure off keeping the stockpile fully stocked and up to date?

Hon. Anita Anand: We are working hard, Mr. Chair, to make sure that we have domestic supply in place for many years to come. We are operating with complementary supply chains at the current time, ensuring that we have a flow of goods coming into Canada and being produced right here in Canada so that front-line health care workers have the PPE they need for years to come.

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll now take a brief pause so that the audio console operators can switch places.

[English]

We'll now resume with the honourable member for Peace River-Westlock, Mr. Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Over the past few days, flooding in the communities of Fort Vermilion, Fort McMurray and Garden Creek has required emergency mass evacuations. These families and communities have already suffered through repeated attacks on their livelihoods in the oil and gas industry and the economic devastation of COVID-19, and now the loss of their homes.

Can the Prime Minister confirm that his government has a plan to assist the flood victims in Fort Vermilion, Fort Mac and Garden Creek?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Minister Blair.

Hon. Bill Blair: I thank the member opposite, Mr. Chair, for that very important question. Like him, all of our thoughts are with the Canadians affected by flooding as well as the first responders who are working hard to keep people safe.

We are very mindful of the situation in Fort McMurray. I've reached out and spoken to Mayor Scott from Fort Mac and Minister Madu about the situation. We have offered the government's help. We are mobilized and ready to respond. No formal request has been received at this time, but we stand ready to help when called upon.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Chair, some farmers and small businesses in my riding are finding out that they're not eligible for the Canada emergency business account because they don't have payroll or T4 summaries. Other businesses don't have an account with CRA.

Can the Prime Minister confirm that the CEBA will be adjusted to ensure that farmers and small businesses don't fall through the cracks?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Ms. Ng, the honourable Minister for Small Business.

Hon. Mary Ng: I want to thank the honourable member for that question. Whether it's the farming business or the small business, everywhere in the country, in all communities, they're essential and really important to us.

We'll continue to listen to those businesses and those farming businesses. The work isn't done. One of the things I did hear loud and clear from businesses, though, was that they needed support in rent. We are helping in that regard and other measures.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Chair, I have start-ups in my riding like that of Jason, who just opened a restaurant in January and has no payroll record from 2019.

Can the Prime Minister confirm that start-ups that don't have payroll records from 2019 will be able to be part of the economic recovery?

Hon. Mary Ng: Indeed, we have put out additional measures to support all businesses in Canada through the regional development agencies. There is support there for businesses that may not qualify for some of the other measures.

The work isn't done. We will continue to work with businesses to make sure that all businesses in the country are indeed supported.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Chair, many of my constituents lost their oil and gas jobs months ago. Their EI has now run out. They don't qualify for the CERB. With everything in lockdown, there's no job market. Their number one concern, when asked about it on my Facebook page, was about the government's plan. How are we going to get the economy back on track?

Can the government inform the House of its plan to restore the economy? When will Canada be revising its health restrictions?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, first of all I would like to thank the member opposite for his question. It gives me the chance to let everyone in the House know that yesterday, we were very pleased to be able to publish a statement supported by all first ministers, all the premiers of the provinces and territories and the Prime Minister, agreeing to some principles that will guide us all across Canada as we move towards restarting the economy. This is a really important step and I'll talk about it more in a minute, perhaps.

• (1345)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Chair, with so many kids at home and spending time online, the risk of exploitation is significant. The RCMP's National Child Exploitation Coordination Centre has found out that predators are sharing their glee and delight that they now have a lot more access to kids and are coaching each other on their methods.

Is the Prime Minister aware of the increased risks of sexual exploitation of children online due to the COVID-19 lockdown? Does the government have any estimates or models to protect children online?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Public Safety.

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, I think the protection of our children is our greatest responsibility. The RCMP centre for monitoring child exploitation is working very collaboratively and closely with all of our community partners in monitoring the situation. We recognize that with a lot of children at home there may be increased risk.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll move on to Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Mr. Chair, I spoke to Lindsay Smith, a real estate professional and community leader in Os-

hawa with 30 years' experience. He fulfills the criteria for government small business funding but does not have a business chequing account, which is currently required to receive such funding. Many small business owners have found themselves in the same position.

Will the government lift this requirement, yes or no?

Hon. Mary Ng: Mr. Chair, we are hearing that from businesses, and I want to assure the member that we are listening and working on it as we speak.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Chair, Lisa Freeman is a constituent of mine. Her father's murderer was granted day parole on April 2. She was refused the right to attend the parole hearing by the minister. She was not even allowed to attend the meeting virtually. COVID-19 was given as the reason. She had no victim's right to face the person who changed her life forever and now he's on parole.

Will the minister commit to putting victims' rights first and at least allow victims and their families to participate in parole hearings virtually, yes or no?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, I'm very pleased to advise the member that a decision has been made. I agree the initial decision of the Parole Board was to prohibit the attendance of victims at those hearings, but we recognized immediately how important that was and steps have been taken to make it possible for victims to participate in those parole hearings virtually by phone or video conference.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Chair, the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry said yesterday that since March, over 6,000 companies have stepped up to the plate to provide their services to producing PPE, yet grave shortages remain and many are complaining about the slow rollout of the government's licensing program. We need a made-in-Canada solution. Canadian manufacturers are up to the job and will create jobs in Canada.

As of today, how many licences has the government given to those 6,000 Canadian companies, and exactly how many pieces of PPE have these companies delivered to date?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, let me just thank the member opposite for the question and say that we do have a made-in-Canada solution.

I am proud of Thornhill Medical in my riding, which, even as we speak, is manufacturing ventilators. It has delivered some ventilators to the Government of Canada. Thank you very much.

In the member opposite's own riding, manufacturers are stepping up and producing PPE, as I am sure the member knows, and I'm sure he shares my pride in Canada's fantastic manufacturers.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Chair, the question was as to how many licences the government has given to those 6,000 Canadian companies.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Health.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I do have some numbers here.

In terms of medical devices, we've authorized a total of 113 devices, 56 disinfectants and 763 medical device establishment licences. We have a number of others in review, hundreds in fact. There have been a small number rejected so far based on lack of critical information, about 126.

We're making progress, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Chair, how many pieces of PPE have these companies delivered to date?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I will have to get back to you with those numbers.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Thank you.

Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Chair, there is an owner of a hair salon in my riding who's biggest concern is the health and safety of his workers and his clients as he modifies his company to reopen post-COVID-19. However, he's worried about counterfeit products. He has been unable to find or get a list of PPE distributors and wants to keep his workplace safe when the health restrictions have been revised.

Will the government commit to providing a list of PPE suppliers to business owners, yes or no?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, our government has been doing a number of things to assist local businesses and those in need across the country. In particular, we are working very hard with a working group on essential services to discuss how we can better help broader sectors of the Canadian economy outside of front-line health care workers.

In addition, we have been assisting health care centres across the country with their PPE procurement from China to Canada. We stand ready to help Canadians.

• (1350)

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): There is time for a brief question from Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Chair, the desired number of daily tests for COVID-19 is set at 60,000. However, on Monday the Prime Minister admitted that this far into the crisis, we're only administering 26,000 per day.

What is stopping the government from reaching the desired 60,000-test mark?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, as the member opposite notes, testing is an important strategy as part of our multi-layered strategy to get Canadians back to work and our economy reopened.

The testing capacity right now is about 20,000 a day across the provinces and territories. There are a number of reasons that testing may not be at the level of 50,000 to 60,000 a day, but we are working with provinces and territories to make sure they have the equipment they need and have the strategies in place to reach those goals.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll now go to Mr. Soroka, from Yellowhead. Go ahead.

Mr. Gerald Soroka (Yellowhead, CPC): Mr. Chair, in my riding of Yellowhead I have the beautiful Jasper National Park and the town of Jasper. They are heavily reliant on tourism, which is now non-existent. Each year they pay land rent for municipal purposes such as roads, parks and cemeteries. They have been told that the land rent will be deferred until September, but they still cannot afford it.

Will the minister help the towns of Jasper and Banff, the only two municipalities in Canada that pay land rent to the federal government? Will the government eliminate the land rent for this year?

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

[English]

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I thank the member for that question. The member is very lucky to represent the amazing town of Jasper, one of the most beautiful places in Canada.

We are very aware of the challenges that municipalities across the country are facing and we are very aware of the particular challenges that the tourism sector is facing. We are working closely with municipalities across the country to support them.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: I was hoping for a yes or a no, but I guess I have to take it.

Mr. Chair, meat-processing capacity has been a major concern since before the COVID pandemic. Now what can go wrong has gone wrong, and we're facing massive backlogs in the beef and pork sectors. Producers have told the minister to stop dragging her feet and support the industry.

Will the minister commit to announcing immediate relief to address the processing crisis in Canada?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We will recognize Ms. Bibeau, the honourable Minister of Agriculture.

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

I agree that the food processing sector is facing a huge challenge right now, because many of their employees became sick and they have had to put in place better measures to protect their workers. Some of them had to close for a few days to a few weeks to get better organized, and it has had a significant impact on our ranchers and our producers.

I can assure you that we are having constant conversations to find the right mechanisms to support them.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Animals are being euthanised on this government's watch, not because of disease but because of lack of action. We're wasting food when experts are warning of a global food crisis. Some of the industry-proposed measures, such as a set-aside program, which was effective in the past, have been on the minister's desk since December.

How bad does this crisis need to be before the government acts?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, we fully recognize the health concerns of workers in meat processing plants and the efforts being made by processors to protect their staff. These efforts have a significant impact on our farmers and ranchers, and we know that.

The business risk management programs are already there to support the farmers. I know that we are working with the provinces to make them work more quickly. I can assure my colleague that we are working with the sector to find the best mechanism quickly.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: The Canadian Federation of Agriculture has come out with an agri-food emergency preparedness plan that focuses on the government's insufficient attention and capacity with regard to the long-term security of Canada's food supply chain amid this global pandemic. They say that immediate action is needed, yet we've seen no plan by the minister or the government to address these concerns.

When can we expect to see the plan for emergency preparedness for the agriculture and agri-food sector, and will the government take seriously the recommendations before it?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Agriculture.

• (1355)

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, we do take all these recommendations very seriously. I am in constant consultation and discussions with the representatives of the different sectors because we want to find the best way to support the sectors since their challenges are different.

They can already access the business risk management mechanisms. For example, under AgriStability it's possible for the farmers right now to get an advance payment. We are working with the provinces to see how we can use AgriRecovery for different sectors. There are already different ways there to support them, and I remind my colleagues that we have increased the loan capacity of FCC to support them as well.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): There is time for a very short question, 15 seconds or so, Gerald.

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Mr. Chair, the \$40,000 that the Canadian emergency business account is providing is insufficient for live-

stock producers. For example, one pork farmer told me he qualified for CEBA. It fed his hogs for only two days.

Hog prices have crashed as of March 25. COVID-19 is disrupting food supplies.

Is the government going to announce a program geared specifically to agriculture?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, we have announced significant programs to support businesses in general, small, medium-sized and large businesses. We are working right now to see where the gaps are for the agricultural sector. We will come back with further measures as soon as we can.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable member for Perth—Wellington, Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Chair, on September 27, 2015, Marco Muzzo got behind the wheel of a vehicle after drinking. His decision cost the lives of Daniel, Harry, Milly and their grandfather, Gary.

Jennifer Neville-Lake was initially told she couldn't even give a victim impact statement, and then was allowed to do it by phone.

Even during COVID-19, does the minister believe that a phone call is adequate for a Parole Board hearing to let someone free after serving only one year for each life that he took?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The Minister of Public Safety, Mr. Blair.

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, I would join the member opposite in expressing my very sincere condolences to Ms. Neville-Lake on the loss of her children and her father. I want to assure the member and Ms. Neville-Lake that protecting Canadians is a top consideration in all Parole Board decisions.

It's also important to understand that day parole is an important part of the process of gradual supervised release, and these decisions are not subject to any political direction. They are made by the Parole Board independently according to specific criteria set out in the Corrections and Conditional Release Act.

As I've said, the ability of victims to participate in these hearings has been addressed by the Parole Board.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, processing issues were already an issue before COVID-19 hit, especially for the beef and pork sectors. The beef sector has proposed a set-aside program. It's supported by our opposition party. It's supported by the industry.

Will the minister commit to a set-aside program?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The Minister of Agriculture.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, I can assure my colleague that this is one option we are looking at very carefully.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, the Cargill facility in Guelph processes nearly three-quarters of all beef in eastern Canada.

Can the Minister of Agriculture confirm that there are adequate CFIA officials to maintain that plant?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, I'm pleased to tell my colleague that we have increased the financing of CFIA by \$20 million, especially to make sure they have all the resources that our food processors need.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, Conestoga Meats has halted pork processing for at least one week after seven employees tested positive for COVID-19.

What additional resources have been made available specifically to Conestoga Meats to maintain the pork supply here in Canada?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, just to clarify the situation, it is the responsibility of the business to put in place the right measures to protect their workers. They do that following the recommendation of their local provincial public health, and the inspectors from CFIA are there to ensure food safety.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, during these times of COVID-19 when processing capacity is extremely limited, will the minister, for the time being, allow provincially inspected facilities to ship meat products across provincial boundaries?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, I will apologize if I did not get the question properly.

I can assure my colleague that everything related to food processing is a very top priority for us right now, and we are making sure that the borders remain open so we can make sure that the food supply chain is fluid.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, I will repeat the question. For meat that comes from a provincially inspected facility, will the minister waive the requirement and allow that meat to go past provincial boundaries?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, I thank my colleague for repeating the question. I am trying hard to work in my second language, and I appreciate it.

This is something we are looking at with CFIA, with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. When it's needed, if we see a territory or a province facing a food shortage, this is something that can be applied, and it obviously has to be done with the provinces.

• (1400)

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, communities like mine, where we have the Stratford Festival and Drayton Entertainment, are eager to know the details of the \$500-million aid package for the arts, culture and sports industries. When will these details be made known, and when will applications open?

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Guilbeault, the honourable Minister of Canadian Heritage.

[English]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Mr. Chair, we are working tirelessly to come up with these details. I'm hoping that they will be made available in the coming days.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We have time for one more, Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, various farm organizations and farm groups have been pushing for many months now, even before COVID-19 hit, for a full review of the business risk management programs, including AgriInvest and AgriStability. One of the concerns I hear on a daily basis is that farmers cannot take on more debt.

Will the minister commit to a full review of these programs and explore non-debt options for these farmers?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, I can assure my colleague that I'm working very hard with my provincial counterparts to make the business risk management suite of programs much faster and rely not only on loans but on grants.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll now move to the honourable member for Saanich—Gulf Islands, Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's good to see the faces of friends, and not just on our laptop screens.

I want to start by positing that in this pandemic, it looks as though the greater the degree of collaboration within a country, the more effective its response to COVID. Contrast, unfortunately, the United States versus New Zealand.

Within Canada, we see that New Brunswick has done very well. New Brunswick is the only province that has put together an all-party cabinet committee to confront COVID-19. I'm wondering if the equivalent of a war cabinet is under consideration by this government.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The right honourable Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, like the honourable member, I do want to underline the degree to which Canadians have worked together. Across the provinces and territories, with the federal government, we've been able to move forward on significant measures that have worked.

As the member herself has highlighted, the regular calls that public servants give to opposition members have contributed significantly in improving the legislation that we have put forward in this House in response to COVID-19. We will continue to collaborate, but we are not at this time looking at a war-style cabinet.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Chair, one thing that makes us think of war times, of course, is seeing the enormous struggles on the ground of communities like Fort McMurray. All Canadians are looking at that community and thinking, “Oh, my goodness, how are they facing this?” They had the economic downturn, the fires and now the floods. The other day, the Deputy Prime Minister referred to spring as flood season and summer as fire season. Before the climate crisis, we used to call them spring and summer.

In the context of this pandemic, acknowledging that we are also in a climate emergency, what preparations has the government taken to help house people under evacuation while maintaining the COVID public health advice?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Public Safety, Mr. Blair.

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, I thank the member opposite for a very important question. We share her concern about the challenges facing communities that are experiencing flooding conditions, and that will also perhaps eventually face fire conditions, and ensuring that we can safely house them during those climate emergencies that do take place in our country. We are already facing a situation in Fort McMurray, and we anticipate that in the very near future in many indigenous northern communities we'll face a similar challenge with regard to ensuring that we find safe housing.

Historically, we would put these people perhaps in a community centre, but that's not appropriate during this particular medical crisis. We are exploring with our provincial partners all of the ways in which we can safely house those individuals as they face those crises of flooding and fires in their communities.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Chair, I have a quick follow-up question.

There are vast areas of British Columbia where forest fires, like Elephant Hill fire, have wiped out the forest. Nothing has been replanted there as a matter of prevention. This is hydrophobic soil. It doesn't take in the water anymore. When it rains, it just washes right down into streams and brooks and rivers.

I know that in the campaign the Liberals spoke of having a tree-planting program. Could that be applied in ways that would be an adaptation measure to help prevent floods?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think it's an excellent recommendation, Mr. Chair. In fact, we have been in discussion with our provincial partners on various infrastructure programs that we are prepared to invest in that will also be intended to mitigate and prevent some of these tragedies. Certainly, I think a tree-planting program could be very useful in these circumstances.

There are other significant measures, but particularly for flood prevention, that will also have our consideration as we go forward and invest in infrastructure across the country. I believe every dollar spent on prevention can save us an enormous amount of money in the eventual cure.

• (1405)

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you.

Turning to the crisis for our seniors, I really want to commend the government. I can see that we've been moving, step by step, dealing with the crisis that hit Canadians. A lot of people are still being left behind. In the spirit of pushing for more, I want to know when we are going to help our seniors. They are watching their retirement savings shrink. They are wondering when it is their turn to see some help.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Middle Class Prosperity.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Mr. Chair, I thank my honourable colleague for her question.

As we've been discussing, since the beginning we've been supporting seniors with helping them to get access to their GIS and OAS, and we will continue to do that. We have also invested to make sure they get access to services at their homes or access to more food. We will continue to work with seniors as we go along in this crisis.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll now go to the honourable member for London—Fanshawe, Ms. Mathyssen.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Chair, the government has decided to provide students not eligible for CERB 40% less in financial supports with the CESB. Why does the government believe that students eat 40% less, that their rent is 40% less and that their overall expenses cost 40% less than those of other Canadians?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Employment.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, last week, our government announced a comprehensive package of measures aimed at supporting students, not only directly through a benefit this summer but also by increasing Canada student loans and Canada student grants and creating a number of additional jobs for students. There are 76,000 new jobs, creating an incentive to serve a recognition that students want to be out there working, and that if they can't be working, they want to be serving their communities. This is a major wraparound investment in our students, and we recognize that's what they were asking for.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Mr. Chair, has the government come to some deal they haven't informed us of to allow students to pay 40% less on their daily expenses or do they just think that students deserve 40% less?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, we believe that students need help, both in terms of a direct income benefit as well as support by way of an increase in student grants and increased access to student loans so they can continue with their studies in the fall. We've created an opportunity for them to serve in their communities. They don't want to be staying home this summer. They want to be working, and if they can't be working, they want to be serving in their communities.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Mr. Chair, it's not just the students who have been left behind by this government. Many pregnant women who were laid off due to the COVID-19 outbreak are now wrongfully being denied access to emergency benefits. Some are even being forced to take maternity benefits early rather than access the emergency benefit program due to being laid off. There's a simple fix. Change "ceased working" because of COVID-19 to "unable to work" because of COVID-19.

When will this government listen to reason and do what's right not only for expectant mothers but for all Canadians who need help and make this benefit universal?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, the fix the member is referring to has to do more with the back-end systems at Service Canada and CRA, and we are working to ensure that no pregnant woman will be denied in any way her entitlement to maternity or parental benefits. In fact, we are working very hard right now, and I can assure everyone in the House that this will be resolved as soon as is humanly possible.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I'm glad to hear that, and I certainly hope to follow up with the minister.

Single parents who rely on spousal or child support payments as their primary source of income and whose ex-partners can't afford to pay due to the pandemic do not qualify for help through the Canada emergency response benefit.

Disproportionately, women take on the responsibility to care for children and are finding themselves struggling to pay for rent and food with no government or financial support. Can the minister inform single mothers across the country how they will help them to support their children without access to CERB?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, we know that while we have made extra payments with the GST and the CCB, that's not enough for many Canadians who are struggling. As I committed to last week in committee, I'm looking into the particular fact the member refers to, and I will have a potential way forward as soon as possible.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Mr. Chair, will the government commit to working with provinces to create paid leave for women exposed to domestic violence and adjustments to working patterns for women exposed to domestic violence while teleworking from home? Will it work to ensure that victims of domestic violence are not penalized through loss of income or their job due to their inability to telework or to go to work if their working sector is considered to be essential during this pandemic?

• (1410)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for her very important question.

We're looking at a number of ways to support women. We've invested in shelters, but we know there is a lot more to do, and I look forward to working with the member opposite to resolve this issue.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We probably have time for one more question.

The honourable member for London—Fanshawe.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Mr. Chair, before COVID-19, current and future post-secondary students across this country were facing annual tuition fees of almost \$65,000 per year on average. In 2016, students collectively owed \$36 billion, \$18 billion of which is owed to the federal government.

Now our students have an inability to raise those funds through work, which is threatened because of this pandemic. While it becomes increasingly critical for workers to hold a post-secondary degree, students today are being made to foot more of the bill for their education, more than any students in history.

Our students are our future. We should be making their education more affordable and more accessible. Will the government work with the provinces to eliminate post-secondary tuition fees through a dedicated post-secondary transfer that meets the needs of our public education institutions?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, one of the first things we did in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was to defer student loan payments, recognizing the anxiety it was causing our students to have to figure out how they were going to make these payments every month.

We're working to ensure, by doubling access to Canada student loans, and, quite frankly, doubling Canada student grants, from \$3,000 to \$6,000. Students don't have to pay that back. For students who get a special grant, students with disabilities and students who have dependants, the \$2,000 grant is being doubled to \$4,000.

Hopefully, this will address some of the debt concerns the member has. I look forward to working with her on other student issues.

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Therrien.

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Mr. Chair, in 1867, Canada as we know it today was created. The Canadian Constitution was signed between two founding peoples, as stated at the time, the English-speaking people and French-speaking people. When Pierre Bourgeault referred to the creation of Canada, he always said that, at that time, the minority status of francophones in Canada was institutionalized.

Over time, the idea of the two founding peoples caught on. Even Pierre Elliott Trudeau fought relentlessly to make Canada as bilingual a country as possible. Unfortunately, history shows that the use of French throughout Canada has declined drastically.

The Canadian government is the only entity that can ensure the use of French and that can put an end to this drain. We're "lucky" because the Prime Minister of Canada is the son of the person who promoted a bilingual Canada.

Health Canada recently agreed that goods from abroad could have instructions for use written only in English. The Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada said that this showed "a flagrant lack of respect for francophones."

My question is for the people who are supposed to enforce the use of French in Canada.

Will the francophones of Canada receive an apology?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Health.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

While the entire country is trying hard to obtain products during the COVID-19 pandemic, shortages of certain products on the shelves are becoming increasingly likely. In response to this situation, Health Canada has taken the extraordinary step of allowing limited imports of products with unilingual labelling.

We acknowledge the importance of sharing information with Canadians in both official languages. This measure is temporary. It applies only to certain products while we fight against COVID-19.

Health Canada is helping businesses provide information on these cleaning products in both official languages before they reach the shelves.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Therrien.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I realize the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique situation in Canada. The problem is that it sets a precedent, and a precedent determines what comes next. Today, the COVID-19 crisis is being held up as an excuse to sacrifice the Official Languages Act on the backs of Canada's francophones and their dignity. COVID-19 is being blamed. It's the Trojan horse.

The people across the way are laughing because French is being trampled on in Canada right now.

What is the Prime Minister going to do to make sure this exception does not become the rule?

• (1415)

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Leader of the Government in the House of Commons has the floor.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, respect for both official languages is absolutely fundamental to our government. The legislation we bring forward, the investments we make and the actions we take to support Franco-Ontarians, Acadians and francophones across the country attest to that. In no way, is this a Trojan horse.

This is an exceptional measure in an exceptional time. It's not a choice. If we had our way, things would be different. This is an exceptional crisis, and we have to respond accordingly. That is what we are doing.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Therrien, you have time for another quick question.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Mr. Chair, the Liberals have opened Pandora's box. When that happens, it's the beginning of the end. All that is left in the bottom of Pandora's box is hope.

The Prime Minister said he hoped they wouldn't have to make any more exceptions. All they are offering Canada's francophone community is hope.

Can they assure us that this will not happen again?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Leader of the Government in the House of Commons has the floor.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: We are offering hope and action. In terms of action over the years, our government has invested more than ever in official languages, not to mention respect for both official languages, francophones and anglophones.

My fellow member, whom I respect and quite like—we work together and negotiate every day—is trying to pick a fight.

There isn't one, however, Mr. Chair. We are working equally hard for the well-being of all francophones and anglophones across the country.

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We will now go to the honourable member for Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, Mrs. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Chair, according to a recent survey conducted by the Canadian Medical Association, Canada's physicians are calling for the government to be more transparent regarding the supply of PPE. Can Minister Anand tell us how many units of PPE are needed to meet the national demand for medical purposes?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, with regard to transparency, I am pleased to announce that as of last week, we are putting up a weekly indication of our PPE procurements on the PSPC web page, which is available for everyone to see, showing quantities ordered and quantities received in Canada for use by front-line health care workers.

In terms of burn rates, which the honourable member mentioned, this is very difficult data to obtain. We are seeking to obtain it so we can further enhance our efficient procurement.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Chair, for our purposes today, could the minister please tell us how many N95 masks have been ordered and how many have been delivered?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, in terms of N95 respirators, we have procured or ordered 155.4 million. We have received 5.3 million masks in Canada as of Friday of last week. That number is increasing, as we have had a number of flights into Canada from China.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Chair, I appreciate that these numbers are now being posted on a weekly basis.

While we have been, rightly, focused on procuring PPE for the health care system, as noted earlier, conversations are now beginning to take place across the country on how to safely start opening our economy. What measures has the Minister for PSPC put in place to ensure that Canadian businesses will have access to PPE for their employees when they begin to safely return to work?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, I thank the member opposite for the excellent question. She is exactly right that we are continuing to think about the next phases of this crisis and the procurements of personal protective equipment.

My department is currently procuring a wide range of emergency supplies and services based on requirements set by public health. We are also focused on how we can help organizations regarding the needs of their essential services and the needs of PPE across Canada during the next phases of this crisis, which we are working hard to address.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Chair, earlier the minister noted that Canadian companies from coast to coast to coast are motivated and are stepping up. Yesterday my colleague from Calgary Nose Hill asked the Minister for ISED repeatedly to quantify how many masks are being produced per day here in Canada. It's a simple question which requires a straightforward answer.

How many masks are being produced daily here at home?

• (1420)

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, I would like to emphasize that there are multiple supply chains operating at the same time. While we are retooling and building up domestic capacity, including in the area of masks, we are importing masks so that we can make sure that front-line health care workers have the supplies they need. It's complementary. It's continuing. We're working hard to build up domestic supply.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): For one last short question, go ahead, Mrs. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will take that to mean that none are being produced here in Canada at this time. Although ministers make continuous references to strong domestic capacity, they regularly fail to quantify what is being produced here at home.

Can the minister tell us how many Canadian companies have offered to provide equipment and manufacturing capacity and how many have received funding for retooling?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, just on the last intervention, I will say that we are procuring 335 million surgical masks and 155.4 million N95 respirators. We are making sure that Canadian health care workers have what they need while Canadian companies are retooling.

In terms of domestic suppliers, we've had over 26,000 domestic and international companies respond to our Buyandsell call-out for suppliers. We have contacted every one of them. We will be continuing to follow up to build up domestic capacity. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Rayes, the member for Richmond—Arthabaska, has the floor.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The government has launched many measures in the past few weeks to support Canadians. The Canada emergency response benefit and the Canada emergency student benefit coming down the pike are two examples. Businesses and farmers have raised questions about both measures. Some provincial governments feel that, in some cases, the measures are at odds with incentives they have put in place to encourage people to work when labour is needed.

I am not questioning the government's desire to help all Canadians, but this is what I would like to ask the Prime Minister. Before introducing these measures, did the government consult the provinces to make sure its measures did not go against provincial measures already in place? After all, the provinces are the ones responsible for getting their own economies going again.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Deputy Prime Minister has the floor.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd also like to thank the member for his question.

We are working closely with the provincial and territorial premiers. Every week, the Prime Minister has a call with the premiers. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] What we've been able to do in responding to this crisis is work together as "Team Canada".

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Rayes has the floor.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, during our 4:30 p.m. calls, one of the things we ask officials, especially those from the finance department, about is workers who have lost their jobs because their employer couldn't continue to operate in light of COVID-19. Those workers qualify for the Canada emergency response benefit and receive \$2,000 a month. When their employer resumes operations, however, and calls to ask them to come back to work, according to what officials have told us, those workers can refuse even if they have no valid reason.

This is my question. If the goal is to help stimulate the economy, how is it that people are allowed to refuse to return to work without a valid reason once their employer is ready to resume operations?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion has the floor.

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, all of our initiatives are around maintaining a connection to the workforce for workers. One of the ways we're doing this is through the Canada emergency wage subsidy.

We know that workers who have been on the CERB and who are transitioning to the wage subsidy have some questions about whether they can even go back to work. I can assure everyone that we're working that out. We don't want to disincentivize returning to work in any way.

That being said, we cannot force workers to go back to a job. That's just beyond what we consider appropriate. We would in fact encourage all employers and workers to get back to their jobs and be ready when the economy opens up and is firing on all cylinders.

• (1425)

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Rayes has the floor.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, in order for companies and businesses to reopen, they are required to follow very clear health guidelines. There's no reason to question what they are doing; the various governments have already deemed it valid.

My question is simple. Public servants are telling us that we can tell Canadians who don't want to go back to work that they are allowed to keep collecting \$2,000 a month unchecked. That's exactly how the officials who answer our questions every day at 4:30 p.m. put it.

Is the government okay with an employee whose employer is asking them to return to work in healthy and safe conditions to say no and continue to collect their \$2,000, yes or no?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion has the floor.

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, I can commit to the House that we will ensure that our officials are clearly sending the message in their briefings that we want workers to go back to their jobs. One of the reasons we're putting in place the wage subsidy is for that very end. We're paying up to 75% of payrolls so that we can ensure that people are working.

Canadians have a number of different reasons for not going back to work, including child care and other responsibilities. I can assure the House that we're making every effort to get the message out that we want people to go back to work.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Rayes has the floor. There is time for one quick question.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, many restaurateurs, bar owners, hairdressers, barbers and estheticians don't qualify for program support for various technical reasons. This is April 29. Can the government tell us today when those people will hear, yes, they are going to receive assistance as part of the economic recovery, which is already under way in Quebec and other provinces?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The Minister for Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade has the floor.

[*English*]

Hon. Mary Ng: Mr. Chair, we have put out a number of measures to help businesses in Quebec and across the country to manage through this period, whether it is by getting access to a small business loan or getting access to the wage subsidy, so that we can keep people employed. In the very early days of both of these, we are seeing almost 500,000—almost half a million—Canadians, businesses, who are getting loans approved to help them through this period, and over 60,000 have applied for the wage subsidy so that they can keep their employees together.

We are going to continue working to help these companies and entrepreneurs across the country.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): That brings to an end the questioning of ministers.

Please note that, pursuant to the order made on April 20, the House has been recalled. As such, the committee will now adjourn, and the House sitting will begin shortly thereafter. The bells will be rung to call in members and a parade will begin the sitting.

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