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Chair: The Honourable Anthony Rota



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• (1200)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to the 10th meeting of the House of Commons Special Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic.

[*English*]

Please note that today's proceedings will be televised in the same way as a typical sitting of the House.

We will now proceed to ministerial announcements.

The honourable Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development.

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Boozoo, aaniin and as-salaam alaikum, colleagues. I hope you're safe. I hope you're well, and I wish the same for your teams and for your loved ones.

It's a privilege to be back in the House, on the traditional territory that the Algonquin peoples have called home for so many generations.

Let me begin by first recognizing and appreciating nurses on the front lines of this work. Last week, as a country, we mobilized to celebrate them. Let me thank the nurses who were by the bedside of Sister Ruth Hennessey in Peterborough and saw her through her final moments, the nurses who were with my own grandmother in her own final moments, the nurses who are having very difficult conversations with their loved ones, explaining why they can't be close to them. We thank them, and we look forward to a day when their work and the demand on their services is less than it is today.

It is my honour to stand in the House and pay tribute to the incredible women, past and present, who have shaped Canada, who have struggled to create change in systems that don't always welcome it, who have pushed to create a stronger and fairer country, and who have led the way in the drive for equality. Our government will continue to take our lead from those on the front lines of the efforts to advance equality. We have worked with them every step of the way since we formed government. Our plan is working because we're working with them.

COVID-19 is a crisis unlike any other. It's hit women hardest with jobs lost and women taking on more unpaid work than they al-

ready were for their kids as well as their elders. Women are the majority of those on the front lines of the fight against COVID. That includes nurses, of course, but also personal support workers, other health care workers, child care workers, food sector workers and social workers.

The rates of domestic violence and gender-based violence were high in Canada pre-COVID, with a woman being killed by her intimate partner every six days. We were already moving ahead with a national action plan to address and prevent gender-based violence. We were already well poised to work with our territorial and provincial counterparts to make this happen. We were already adopting a trauma-informed, culturally sensitive and intersectional approach.

What the pandemic has done is exacerbate the vulnerabilities of too many women and their children. COVID-19 has resulted in a shadow pandemic, exacerbating the issue of gender-based violence. As a result of the necessary isolation measures, coupled with the pressures that people are experiencing, many of our partners on the front lines are telling us that the rates and severity of violence have increased. At the same time, some organizations are telling us that things are eerily quiet. This is especially true in more rural and remote parts of this country, where too many are without access to high-speed Internet.

The isolation measures in place mean that some women are unable to seek help due to increased scrutiny and control, compounded by a lack of access to friends, extended families, community centres, schools and places of worship. In too many instances, they're trapped at home with their abusers.

Just because we can't see it does not mean it's not happening. This pandemic has not made the violence stop. It's driven it further underground. We may not be able to see it, but we know it's happening.

Too many may not be aware that support organizations are open and are ready to help. Help is available. You don't need to stay at home if your home is not a safe home.

To ensure that these organizations are able to continue their critical work at this important time, our government announced \$50 million to support them—\$40 million being delivered through my own department and \$10 million being delivered through the department of Indigenous Services Canada. I thank my colleague there for his strong partnership.

As well, \$23 million has been provided to Women's Shelters Canada and the Canadian Women's Foundation, who worked quickly to get money into the bank accounts of front-line organizations. I thank Lise Martin and Paulette Senior for their effective leadership. Payments began to flow in April. As of today, I can confirm that 422 women's shelters and 89 sexual assault centres have received funding.

• (1205)

We've of course reached a separate agreement with the Government of Quebec, which is receiving \$6.4 million in federal funding to flow to their front-line organizations. Those funds were transferred to the province in early May.

We're deeply grateful to women's and equality-seeking organizations across the country for providing services to women and to vulnerable children. They're providing critical supports, and we will continue to support them so that they can continue to be there for women and children in their hour of need.

Organizations are using these funds to keep their staff paid, to keep their doors open and to ensure that the most vulnerable in communities across the country have a place to turn to. The money is helping to assist them in purchasing cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment to protect workers and those they serve, and in securing additional laptops and software so that they can support their clients remotely and allow for necessary physical distancing measures.

An additional \$10 million will be distributed to address gaps and support hundreds of other organizations. All eligible organizations will receive funding by early June, and I will have more to share with my colleagues and with Canadians in the coming days.

If your home is not a safe home for you or your family, you don't have to stay. Reach out to a local organization directly or talk to someone you trust to discuss your options and plan your exit. Visit sheltersafe.ca. If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency services. There are people answering crisis lines across the country and they can help you even if you have only a few minutes to talk, including the kids helpline. You can reach them at 1-800-668-6868.

If you can't speak on the phone, the signal for help is a simple one-handed sign you can use during a video call. It can help you silently show that you need help and want someone to check in with you in a safe way. Put your palm to the camera, tuck your thumb and trap your thumb. If you see someone signalling for help, call and ask them open-ended questions like "Are you okay?", "Do you want me to call 911?" or "Do you want me to check in with you regularly?" Visit the Canadian Women's Foundation website for more details. They have created this hand signal.

No one should have to live through violence, whether it's physical, psychological, financial or sexual. I want to assure all those impacted by gender-based violence, and indeed all Canadians, that we will continue to be there for you throughout the pandemic, and that as we move forward together, things will get better.

Thank you.

• (1210)

The Chair: We'll now go to Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's an honour to be back in the House representing the people of Kildonan—St. Paul. They elected me to fight for everyday Canadians, and I've been working hard to deliver that to them during this devastating pandemic.

I'm proud to say the Conservative team has made real progress over the last two months advocating for people left behind by this government. Before I get started, I would like to sincerely thank my Conservative colleagues from Elgin—Middlesex—London and Calgary Skyview, as well as our shadow minister of employment, on their excellent work advocating for Canadian women.

This Liberal government has left many women behind during this pandemic, and were it not for the dedication and perseverance of my colleagues, many would still be without support. They are making real change in the lives of Canadian women, and I'm proud to serve alongside them. While I thank the Minister for Women and Gender Equality for providing us with an update on how previously announced funding is being spent, I have grave concern for the vulnerable women's organizations whose funding has been cut by her government and must be restored.

This is very troubling because the true heroes are on the front lines working tirelessly every day during this pandemic to support Canada's most vulnerable women and girls, yet last week we learned that nine organizations across Canada, organizations like the London Abused Women's Centre, that support women who are victims of sex trafficking were hit with the devastating news that this government was cutting their funding. The federal government cut their funding for programming that worked to stop the sex trafficking of women and girls. By the end of May, they will no longer be able to provide sex trafficking counselling to women in need in London. This is devastating news because this program provided support to over 3,000 women and girls over five years. This program was originally funded under the previous Conservative government.

Executive director of the London Abused Women's Centre, Megan Walker, has bravely stood up against the Liberal government's cuts. Her recent remarks really hit home for me. "I feel sick," she said. "All we know is there's no funding for programs like ours across the country. The individuals who are going to suffer are those who are sometimes the most marginalized in our society—women and girls who are forced into the sex trade to do horrendous things. It's actually really heartbreaking." The Conservatives agree wholeheartedly with Megan, and we stand with her and the eight other organizations across Canada that have had their funding cut and will no longer be able to support vulnerable women as they did before this government's cuts.

The minister mentioned in her remarks that \$10 million of previously announced funds will be redistributed to, as she said, "address gaps". This sounds nice, but there are no real details or any commitments being made to these organizations. Meanwhile women's groups are reporting that sex trafficking has been on the rise in this pandemic. I'm sure many of these groups will hear the minister's remarks today. She could take the opportunity in the House at any time to announce that funding will be restored for these nine organizations and, really, it would be quite simple for this government, given that they're shovelling billions of dollars out the door every day. This is really just a drop in the bucket for these organizations, but it would mean a world of difference to them. I hope the minister makes the choice to put these organizations at ease by standing up today in the House, on the record, and restoring their funding.

If the minister does choose to do this, it may provide more public confidence in her government with regard to their ability to support women impacted by the pandemic, which is important because, as she well knows, the economic impact to Canadians has been especially severe for women. There were just over three million jobs lost in March and April alone, with women facing a higher rate of unemployment according to Statistics Canada. Female employment dropped 17% compared to 14% for men, with women 15 to 24 years old suffering the biggest drop, at a 38% decline in employment. In my home province of Manitoba, 56% of Manitobans who lost their jobs between February and April were women, compared to 44% who were men.

The hospitality, retail and restaurant sectors, which employ primarily women, have been at a standstill since mid-March, as we well know, which has forced many women to apply for the CERB because the government's rollout of the wage subsidy program has not been effective and, worse, their slow rollouts and the complicated, arbitrary red tape restrictions on program funding have shut out many female entrepreneurs in my riding from government support. Shamefully, this government originally left out expectant mothers who lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. They were unable to access the CERB for over a month. Many pregnant women faced losing portions of their maternity benefits that they were planning to use after their babies were born. Conservatives heard their concerns, held this government accountable on behalf of expectant mothers and changes were made, a victory for Canadian women.

Over the past week, our Conservative team has been calling on the government to find a solution for women whose ex-partners cannot provide spousal support. These women face the loss of thou-

sands of dollars in spousal payments and they do not qualify for the CERB, but the courts are not enforcing the payment of these spousal support payments. The Prime Minister's response to this urgent issue was simply to ignore the women across Canada facing the prospect of either paying their rent or putting food on the table for their children. The minister does not have to wait another month to make a statement in the House in support of women. She can commit today to work with opposition members to find a solution for women facing severe shortfalls because of lost child support payments.

• (1215)

Canadians have seen first-hand that when the government works together with the Conservative opposition, Canada's women and families benefit.

Just last week, in fact, the Minister of Employment announced that much-needed benefits like the guaranteed income supplement, the Canada child benefit and the GST/HST credit would not be cut off for individuals and parents who do not file their taxes by June 1, so those who don't get their paperwork in won't automatically have their benefits cut off.

I am pleased that the minister considered and accepted this policy change proposal from my Conservative colleague, the member for Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry. His work will benefit millions of Canadians.

Before I conclude, I would like to bring to the minister's attention an issue that I've raised with her department before. The only Women and Gender Equality Canada regional office in western Canada is in Edmonton. As of last year, the six dedicated staff have helped women's organizations deliver programming in the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

I know the minister would agree that western Canadian women need more support than this. The scale of the challenges facing women in Manitoba during this pandemic is daunting. We have the largest number of children in care, per capita, in the world, with over 10,000 children in the child welfare system, over 90% of whom are indigenous.

Additionally, gender-based violence continues to be a persistent issue in the Prairies, particularly in Manitoba where women face what are among the highest rates of domestic violence in the country. Just this past Friday, Marie Morin, a Winnipeg woman, was murdered, allegedly by her partner in what police called an act of domestic violence.

Manitoba women and girls need support. They need more help.

I would ask that the minister consider opening a Women and Gender Equality Canada regional office in Manitoba so that the federal government can do its part to better support my province's most vulnerable women and girls. The women's organizations that support vulnerable women in Manitoba are working overtime during this pandemic. It's really incredible, actually. I'm so proud of the hard work that organizations in my riding are doing to support our communities, organizations like Marymount, which is a safe place where young, vulnerable girls can go to heal and be supported and loved.

These organizations are so important, and I urge the government to do everything it can to support them during this challenging time.

Finally, given our important discussion today concerning victims of sex trafficking, I would be remiss if I did not give sincere thanks and acknowledgement to the former Conservative member of Parliament from my riding of Kildonan—St. Paul, Joy Smith. She made Canadian history as the first sitting MP to amend the Criminal Code twice, both times to better protect victims of human trafficking with mandatory minimum sentencing for traffickers of children, and to better protect Canadian citizens and permanent residents abroad from trafficking and exploitation. Joy Smith continues to do phenomenal work on this file, and I am truly honoured to carry the torch for Kildonan—St. Paul in the House of Commons to advocate for Canada's most vulnerable women and girls.

[Translation]

The Chair: We will now move on to Ms. Chabot.

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, I would like to commend you for your testimony with regard to women and I thank you for it.

There are many exceptional women. I would say they are everywhere. In one way or another, they are confined in this whirlwind of disorganization and uncertainty. We find them on the front lines, in the health care and social services network, in the CHSLDs, in grocery stores, or at the bedsides of the sick. Some of them go home alone.

Given that equality between men and women is still far from being achieved, the pandemic is making an already problematic situation worse. Yes, the pandemic is shining the light on women's reality. However, before this pandemic, the face of issues like poverty, safe and good-quality social housing, seniors, caregivers, workers in the healthcare network or in essential services, and even the cases of violence, was still predominantly a female face. This crisis therefore is exacerbating what was already a problem, because women are being directly hit by the economic consequences of COVID-19 and by the social consequences of the lockdown.

In this pandemic, those most at risk, physically financially, socially or psychologically, are women. In Canada, almost 90% of hospital nursing staff are women. About 80% of the orderlies, whose contribution we highlighted yesterday, are women. Most family caregivers, 77% of them, are women, generally women older than 45. Since their life expectancy is higher than that of their

spouses, they often survive them after they have taken care of them. The majority of seniors are also women living alone.

Although their level of education is higher than men's, women still represent three-quarters of part-time workers. Some may say that some of them choose that situation in order to achieve a work-life balance. Even then, domestic and family responsibilities fall to women. However, other factors also explain the disparity. Women are overrepresented in certain areas of employment, such as hospitality. In service sectors, like hotels, restaurants, and retail, the jobs are mostly part-time. So women are not working part-time by choice, but because they are not offered anything else. We are told that by a sociologist.

In addition, women receive lower salaries than men. Even though equality exists in law, actual equality is often harder to find. Women are often working part-time. I would also emphasize that they face more difficulties. Only one-third of them qualify for benefits such as employment insurance. I can show you all those figures to demonstrate that, while the face of the current crisis is female, it is also a reality that we have to consider. The problems existed well before the crisis and they must be dealt with.

According to her mandate letter, the Minister of Employment must implement Canada's Pay Equity Act. This is a matter of urgency. She must also work with the provinces and territories on the ratification of the ILO's 2019 Violence and Harassment Convention. That is also a commitment that we must make. In fact, according to figures published by Statistics Canada, one woman in 10 is worried about being affected by a situation of violence and a number feel that they will experience a situation of domestic violence. That is quite startling.

● (1220)

Against such a background, we must not lose sight of the fact that we must hear people's testimony, simply to emphasize the importance of the role of women. The goal is also to remind ourselves that our work on behalf of women—in terms of their reality and their absolute right to equality—must be work that we do every day, work that we cannot lose sight of. This is particularly important during these crises, which bring with them issues that are not only social but also financial.

We must also remember this government's commitment to conduct a complementary gender-based analysis of its financial, economic and social policies. In Quebec, we call it a gender-differentiated analysis. We must ask ourselves whether each action we take discriminates against women or whether we are supporting them with gender equality so that the discrimination disappears.

The fight for women is a one that society as a whole must fight, in all its forms. I believe that it is even more important to remind ourselves that the women we are not talking about and not worrying about are working and are in the front lines. We have finally realized how important their work is. We must not simply thank them, tell them how good they are and that we need them.

It is not enough to acknowledge how important they are for a day, or during a crisis. We must acknowledge that they are essential for society every day.

• (1225)

[English]

The Chair: We will now go to Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We stand at a pivotal moment, a moment that will be looked back on for how Canadian society and the global community banded together to help one another fight an invisible enemy. Hard decisions had to be made and, with the spirit of collaboration, parliamentarians have come together to deliver programs that are helping millions of Canadians weather the storm of the pandemic.

While we are all in the same storm, Mr. Chair, we are not all in the same boat and, sadly, many are taking on water. COVID-19 has exposed the many cracks in our system and has highlighted the millions of Canadians who were struggling before the pandemic even began.

I think of the many people in my constituency who have no access to health benefits. With fewer employers offering benefits, people are having to pay out of pocket for needed medications. There are those workers who are deemed essential and who fear falling ill, as they have no sick leave and, with poverty-level minimum wages, they struggle to pay rent and put food on the table. There are seniors struggling on fixed incomes, who see the costs of everyday goods continuing to rise and the money they receive from their pensions covering less. As well, I often speak to younger Canadians who do not even know what a workplace pension is because they are becoming increasingly rare.

Daily, I speak with women who face incredible barriers, barriers that generations of women have been fighting to tear down, yet they still stand. Those barriers existed through government after government. Those barriers continue to stand under this Liberal government. You can forgive those who are discouraged by the fact that they still must fight the battles of generations past, despite its being 2020.

While we are still experiencing the effects of COVID-19, there is hope that we will soon see the other side of this pandemic. At that time, we will stand at the crossroads, and we'll have to decide how we go forward. What kind of Canada do we want to see? Already, like clockwork, you can count on those in the right wing sirening a call for austerity and a devastating agenda of cuts that will prolong the sufferings of Canadians and what they are already feeling.

I hear from women's organizations and charities about the kinds of supports they need. They and I humbly propose a different vision from the same old neo-liberal agenda that is on offer, one where the government stops the project-based funding model for organizations that support women and charities. That model has forced organizations to continuously address the symptomatic problems women and marginalized Canadians face, rather than address the real issues. We need to change how we fund these organizations. Until we get back to offering consistent, reliable core funding, we

cannot begin to address the systemic barriers that keep people down.

In my home of London, Ontario, we saw a clear example of this just last week. Funding that was allocated for organizations to provide long-term support to trafficked and sexually exploited women and girls is being cut. These women already face incredible trauma and abuse. They need support and stability, and the government is taking it away because the project has ended—except people don't live in projects with hard timelines. I fear for the women who will come after and who are fleeing violence and now have fewer places to turn to because of the actions of this feminist government.

Because of the models of funding that governments have put in place, they starve women's organizations. They have to scramble to find whatever funding they can to deliver the critical supports they offer our communities across this country. Short-term funding can't solve long-term problems. Sadly, because of COVID-19, when more is being asked of them, when supports are needed the most, their ability to raise money has all but vanished. These organizations, like many Canadians, don't have rainy day funds. They don't own the buildings they are in, and they are scrambling to keep the lights on while helping people who desperately need it.

We can help them so that we can help Canadians. We need a government that will take some bold steps and show some courage.

Another simple but effective measure that can help women now and going forward is for Canada to establish paid domestic violence leave. From the government's own data, domestic violence accounted for 30% of all police-reported violent crime in Canada in 2017. Eight out of 10 times, women were the victims.

Many women and those who are marginalized not only suffer at the hands of their abusers but also suffer significant financial costs when they are trying to escape. We can and should put in whatever financial backing we can to help those who are fleeing that violence. What we need is a government that has the political will to do it.

Mr. Chair, women are still not equal in the workplace. Of course, we see this in a variety of ways. I'll quote the former member of Parliament for Qu'Appelle and the fifth woman ever elected to the House of Commons, Gladys Strum, who said:

I submit to the house...that no one has ever objected to women working. The only thing they have ever objected to is paying women for working.

• (1230)

For every 10 jobs that have been lost due to COVID-19, six were lost by women. We have seen the extreme toll that takes.

We have also seen women laid off, unable to acquire the needed hours to receive maternity benefits. Every week, expectant mothers reach out to my office to ask what will happen to them in a post-pandemic world where they are unable to return to work and fall short of the hours they need to claim the benefits they need.

There are many ways the work that women do goes unrecognized. Because of old, tired views of what constitutes work, enshrined by outdated laws and regulations, a lot of work is unpaid, overlooked and taken for granted. With children out of school, the home has become the day care or school. With a lack of supports for seniors at home, often the responsibility of caring for them falls on women.

While we have made a lot of progress since MP Strum said those words in the House in 1945, when it comes to recognizing the work of women and pay equity, a lot more needs to be done. Around 56% of women are employed in occupations involving the five Cs: caring, clerical, catering, cashiering and cleaning. The differences in how female-dominated occupations are valued relative to male-dominated jobs contribute to gender-based pay inequality. Right now, Canadian women make 32% less than men do, and the gap is even wider for racialized women, immigrant women, women with disabilities and indigenous women.

Respect for indigenous women and girls and two-spirit people must be at the core of a new Crown-indigenous relationship, but for too many indigenous women, systemic discrimination and violence continue to be a reality.

After the Conservatives refused to address the tragedy of murdered and missing indigenous women for almost a decade, the Liberal government finally launched a long-overdue inquiry. However, they set it up with a limited mandate and failed to adequately care for the families who courageously shared their stories. The inquiry's finding of a genocide against indigenous women in Canada demands action from all Canadians. The report from the national inquiry must not sit on the shelf. The government needs to work in partnership with indigenous women, the families of the murdered and missing, and the communities, to implement the inquiry's call for justice and the calls to action brought forward by communities.

As more and more businesses are slowly allowed to reopen, people need to know they can return to work safely. They need to know their children will be cared for and kept safe. Many people don't have the privilege of working from home, and the government has a responsibility to guarantee them more security and supports. People have sacrificed so much, and Canadians did this in good faith. They put the needs of their communities first so we could weather this storm. The government must make public its plan to transition into our next phase so that those sacrifices are not wasted.

With bold thinking and political courage, we could bring forward some exciting new realities. Let's make workplaces safer and give workers 10 mandatory days of paid sick leave. Let's make child care available, affordable and accessible. Canadians want to go back to work. Let's make sure that when they go back, they can stay safe and stay healthy.

We have a lot of choices ahead of us. We can ensure a Canada that removes the barriers women and marginalized people face so

that they can meet their full potential. We can address the core funding crisis women's organizations and charities face. We can work to change the laws to recognize all the many ways women work and contribute to our economy and society. We can address pay equity, an issue that is long overdue. We can redefine relationships with indigenous communities across Canada. We can move forward in a positive, progressive way. We can make further investments in the people who make up the neighbourhoods, organizations and communities we love. They are our foundations. They are our anchor.

It is certainly never too late to invest in people and the programs that reinforce our society. That ship hasn't sailed. In fact, the tide is just coming in.

Thank you.

• (1235)

The Chair: The next statement goes to Mr. Manly.

Mr. Paul Manly (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, GP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that we are on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people. To them, I say *meegwetch*.

Ideally, this response to the honourable Minister for Women and Gender Equality on behalf of the Green Party would be given by the honourable member for Fredericton, but I am on parliamentary duty today for the Green Party caucus, and I will humbly do my best to speak to this issue.

Honourable members in the House may have noticed that I wear a moosehide square on my jacket. The Moose Hide Campaign is a grassroots movement of indigenous and non-indigenous men and boys who are standing against violence toward women and children. The campaign was started in 2011 by Paul Lacerte, a member of the Carrier first nation, and his daughter, Raven. The idea came to them during a hunting trip on the traditional territory along the Highway of Tears, a stretch of highway in northern B.C. where many indigenous women have been murdered or gone missing.

Since the day Paul and Raven were inspired to start the Moose Hide Campaign, more than a million moosehide squares have been distributed. The moosehide square is meant to be a conversation starter, a way to engage men and to speak out against violence. As men, we have a responsibility to address the issue of violence towards women and children. It is up to us to promote peer-to-peer accountability and do the work required to end the cycle of violence.

Some Canadian households have managed to turn the social isolation experience into meaningful, positive family time with board games, craft projects, family cooking, adventures and more, but for many women and children, home is not a safe place at the best of times. Social isolation, financial difficulties and alcohol consumption have all contributed to an increase in violence against women and children.

In Nanaimo—Ladysmith, organizations like Haven Society, Island Crisis Care Society, and the Society for Equity, Inclusion, and Advocacy are on the front line of this crisis. I want to thank the people at the centres for their work helping women and children escape violence and abuse, and supporting families on their healing journey.

The increase in gender-based violence is one example of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women. In the time I have today, I will highlight some other examples.

The pandemic has laid bare the inequalities in our society. It has laid bare our blind spots, because the things that are most deeply entrenched are often the most difficult to see.

As a nation, we watched Italy run out of ventilators and the world turn soccer fields into makeshift hospitals. Struck by the images of doctors and nurses struggling to keep pace, we quickly saw what Canada's own underfunded health care system was up against. In a rush to prepare, surgeries were cancelled and dentist appointments postponed. We hung up rainbows, banged pots and pans and said goodbye to family, friends, colleagues and neighbours.

Unwilling to stand idle and allow the health care system to collapse, governments at all levels, parties of all stripes and citizens across the country committed to flattening the curve.

In a frenzy to order more ventilators and clear more hospital beds, we overlooked where we would be hit the hardest. COVID-19 left a path of devastation in long-term care facilities across the nation. The pandemic revealed gross negligence and inequality in the management and hiring practices of privately owned long-term care facilities.

Ownership changes led to contract flipping and union decertification. Workers were laid off and then rehired part time for lower wages and no benefits. These health care workers, the vast majority of them women, were compelled to work at multiple facilities to make ends meet. Allowing these workers to be devalued and exploited to increase profit margins created conditions that led to the rapid spread of COVID-19 from one long-term care facility to another.

This has been one of the harshest lessons of this crisis. Eighty-one per cent of the COVID-19-related deaths in Canada have been associated with long-term care facilities. The private, for-profit care facilities were hit the hardest. The front-line workers we bang pots and pans for every night are predominantly women. They are nurses, technicians, care aides, kitchen staff and cleaners in our health care system and long-term care facilities. They are low-wage workers in essential services. Their work is often unseen and unacknowledged. It's important that we cheer for them. It's even more important that we ensure they receive fair compensation for their work.

• (1240)

While the government has provided a lifeline to many Canadians who lost work as a result of COVID-19, too many are still struggling to keep their heads above water.

Last week the Canadian Women's Chamber of Commerce and the Dream Legacy Foundation released the results of a national survey of close to 350 diverse entrepreneurs, including women, visible minorities, indigenous, LGBTQ+, refugees and immigrants. They found that these business owners are experiencing greater impacts resulting from the COVID-19 crisis than other segments of the population. Fifty-three per cent of women entrepreneurs reported an additional burden of child care, compared to 12% of male entrepreneurs. Sixty-one per cent of women-owned businesses reported loss of contracts, customers and clients. In contrast, 34% of businesses across Canada reported cancellation of contracts.

In Nanaimo—Ladysmith I've heard from countless business owners who are experiencing COVID-related loss of revenue. I know that even with government assistance, many businesses will not survive this crisis. Most of the micro-business owners I've heard from are women. Many of them have reported they are unable to access government assistance. Many of the small business operators who are telling me their businesses are unlikely to survive through this year are women.

I'm thinking of a newly opened restaurant that doesn't have enough of a business track record to access help and is hanging on by a thread. I'm thinking of a day care operator who qualified for provincial assistance funding to cover her business's fixed costs, only to discover she is now ineligible for the CERB and cannot afford her personal cost of living.

As Canada recovers, we cannot afford another misstep. We must think of those who are vulnerable, those who have fallen through the cracks.

Yesterday, my colleague the honourable member for Fredericton stated that she spoke with the leadership of the Native Women's Association of Canada. They told her they did not feel heard within this government. They expressed frustration with the red tape and colonial criteria of funding applications. They told her they wrote to the Prime Minister last month to express their disappointment in being left out of critical decisions. My honourable colleague asked, in light of the approaching one-year anniversary of the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls inquiry report, and considering the recent spike in indigenous women experiencing violence due to COVID-19, would the minister commit to direct, solid core funding for the Native Women's Association of Canada?

Very few Canadians are aware that one of the top recommendations of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was to create a guaranteed annual livable income for all Canadians, taking into account diverse needs, realities and geographic locations. In two short months the idea of a guaranteed livable income has gone from a relatively obscure policy discussion to a mainstream debate. It's an idea that has gained support across the political spectrum. Spain recently announced its intention to institute such a program. A guaranteed livable income would reduce inequality in this country and alleviate many of the social issues associated with inequality. I urge the government to give it the serious consideration it deserves.

We must invest properly in the structures that hold us together, or we risk our country coming apart. I want to see our commitment to protect our health care system from being overburdened mirrored in our response to the mental health crisis, the housing crisis, the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, and the crisis of domestic violence.

Too many Canadians are falling between the cracks, and a disproportionate number of them are women. We in this Parliament can make policy choices that will flatten the curve of inequality in this country and around the world. That is the curve I want to see flattened.

Thank you.

• (1245)

The Chair: We'll now proceed to the presenting of petitions, for a period not exceeding 15 minutes.

[*Translation*]

I would like to remind honourable members that petitions presented during a meeting of the Special Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic must already have been certified by the clerk of petitions.

[*English*]

Once a member has presented their petition, we ask that they please drop off their petition at the table.

Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Chair, I'm pleased to be presenting four petitions today.

The first petition is in support of Bill S-204, which opposes organ harvesting and trafficking.

While organ harvesting from unwilling prisoners is a well-documented phenomenon in China, the World Health Organization under its current leadership has actually praised China's organ transplant system. For example, Francis Delmonico, chairman of the organ transplantation task force at the WHO, said at the end of last year, "The biggest feature of the Chinese experience in organ transplantation is the strong support from the Chinese government, which is an example that many countries should follow."

This is another demonstration that the capture of the WHO by the Chinese state requires scrutiny and accountability, and the petitioners believe that Canada must act in the meantime to combat forced organ harvesting and trafficking by passing Bill S-204.

The second petition deals with the terrible persecution of Afghanistan's dwindling Sikh and Hindu minority community. On March 25, dozens of people were killed by a suicide bomber who attacked a prominent gurdwara. After this, the funerals of the victims were also attacked.

I join with the petitioners in calling on the immigration minister to create a special program to allow the direct sponsorship of vulnerable minorities. The petitioners note that the community in Canada is ready to act to put up the money and provide the support, but the government must create the mechanism by which this sponsorship can occur. I note that the member for Cloverdale—Langley City has been leading on this issue by sponsoring e-petition 2501, for those who want to sign it.

The third petition deals with government Bill C-7. The petitioners are very concerned that the government is seeking to remove safeguards, which they once thought were vital, associated with the euthanasia regime. In particular, the petitioners are concerned about the fact that the government is trying to eliminate the 10-day reflection period that normally exists prior to a person's receiving euthanasia.

The fourth and final petition deals with human rights concerns internationally, in particular in Pakistan and Thailand. The petitioners highlight the plight of Pakistani asylum seekers who are in Thailand. The petition calls on the government to do more to support these vulnerable asylum seekers and seeks the repeal or reform of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which are often used perversely against minority communities. It's important that we not forget about vital international human rights issues, especially when crackdowns may be worsening in the midst of this pandemic.

The Chair: Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC): Mr. Chair, this petition urges the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to use the powers granted to him to create a special program to help persecuted minorities in Afghanistan. The recent bombing in early July killed leaders from both the Sikh and Hindu communities in Afghanistan and demonstrates their ongoing vulnerabilities, especially since these leaders were on their way to meet the president.

These Sikh and Hindu communities are ready to sponsor Afghan minority refugees, and this petition is being put forward to urge a change in approach.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Barsalou-Duval, the floor is yours.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Mr. Chair, I present petition No. e-2429, the objective of which is to create an ombudsman for immigration.

Many in my constituency are frustrated by cases that are often bungled or processed too quickly by the officials. They are seeking additional protection for those cases, a second look at the processing of immigration claims.

I must say that this is a wish that other hon. members have expressed. We have the impression that MPs' offices have become ombudsman's offices, in a way. When there is a problem, MPs' offices are used like Service Canada offices. We believe that it is not our role to complete all the claims again and to review the procedures. There should be government services for those kinds of things.

Clearly, in an ideal world, the entire immigration system would be in the hands of the Government of Quebec.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Manly.

• (1250)

Mr. Paul Manly: Mr. Chair, I have two petitions today.

The first one calls upon the government to issue a statement condemning the People's Republic of China's persecution of Falun Dafa practitioners. They request that the Crown's Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship list the PRC as a refugee source country, thereby allowing swifter accommodation for those fleeing its persecution.

The second petition is from many of my constituents in Nanaimo—Ladysmith. They want us to follow the example of the European Union. They are calling on the government to ban the sale and/or manufacture of animal-tested cosmetics and their ingredients in Canada moving forward.

The Chair: Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Mr. Chair, following the member for Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, I would also like to present a petition where the signatories have grave concerns with respect to human organ trafficking. As the member stated, Canadians can be rightly concerned with the WHO's endorsement of practices that are

currently being undertaken by the state in China, so we're looking for support for Bill S-204.

The Chair: We'll now proceed to the questioning of ministers.

[*Translation*]

Please note that we will suspend the proceedings every 45 minutes to allow the employees supporting the work of the sitting to replace each other in complete safety.

[*English*]

The honourable Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Scheer.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Canadians are gradually going back to work and expecting their elected representatives to do the same thing. Next week, the legislative assembly of Quebec will sit three times a week. Then it will sit four times a week during its two sessions in June.

Can the Prime Minister tell Canadians why he feels that we do not have to come back to work here in the House of Commons?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): For several weeks, the House has been sitting three times a week, including twice by virtual means so that hon. members across the country, not just those who live in Ottawa, can be here to represent their constituents.

We will continue to ensure that Parliament is functioning, even when we are in this crisis situation.

[*English*]

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Mr. Chair, the Prime Minister knows that the House is not sitting normally. This is a committee of the whole. It's not the normal way that the House of Commons does its business and the Prime Minister should acknowledge that.

I've raised the issue of Brandt Tractor in my riding numerous times with the Prime Minister. I'd like to do so again today because Conservatives have been asking for weeks for the Liberals to amend the wage subsidy to allow companies that have acquired another company to compare their revenues based on the combined revenues of those two previous companies.

Last week the government announced a change to eligibility for the wage subsidy for companies formed by an amalgamation but not for acquisitions. There are many employees whose jobs depend on the answer to this question.

Can the Prime Minister confirm whether these same rules will be extended to acquisitions?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, in response to the honourable member's first comment, these are not normal times. We are in a pandemic situation where Canadians are having to adjust in many different ways. At the same time, it is important that we keep our parliamentary institutions going and that we provide opportunities for MPs to ask questions of the government on behalf of their constituents. That's why we have had three sittings a week over the past number of weeks.

In regard to the business in the member opposite's riding, I can highlight that finance officials have been in touch with that company and we continue to look at ways of closing further gaps. Even as we've helped millions of Canadians and hundreds of thousands of companies, there is more to do and we will keep working on that.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Mr. Chair, in March 2019, the rating agency Fitch issued a warning about Canada's overall government debt level. They said that Canada's gross general government debt remains close to a level that is "incompatible with 'AAA' status".

Now we all know what that means. If our credit is downgraded, that will mean taxpayers will pay more to service the cost of that debt.

Can the Prime Minister tell the House how much it will cost Canadians in additional debt-servicing charges if Canada's credit rating is downgraded?

• (1255)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, there are only two G7 countries that had unanimous AAA credit ratings for their economic and fiscal management going into this crisis: Germany and Canada.

We have a perfect score in terms of credit agencies because we have managed to keep our debt as it relates to the size of our GDP under control. We were responsible over the past five years, which means that when this pandemic hit us, we had the means to invest and to help, directly, millions upon millions of Canadians who needed that help.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Mr. Chair, the exact opposite is true. Remember that when that government was first elected, they promised that the deficits would be small and temporary, just \$10 billion a year for four years. Then they had to throw away that metric and said that as long as our debt-to-GDP ratio remains constant, that will be okay.

We all know that the economic output has shrunk. Meanwhile, spending even before this pandemic was going through the roof. Remember, it was the Liberal government that said Loblaw's deserved \$12 million for new fridges, and that Mastercard, a credit card company, deserved \$50 million in corporate bailouts. The government made Canada weak heading into this pandemic, and all this additional spending that is being borrowed to provide assistance to Canadians is coming on the heels of record deficits and is hurting Canada's ability to maintain its credit rating.

One of the ways you can protect your credit rating is if you show the people you owe the money to how you're going to pay it back. Is the government willing to provide Canadians with an update as to how they will get Canada's fiscal track back under control when this pandemic is over?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, this is déjà vu all over again. We've heard yet again the same economic arguments that the Conservatives have been making for years. They made them in the 2015 election, when we proposed to invest in Canadians and they talked about debt reduction and austerity. They lost that election. Then in 2019, after four years of our demonstrating that investing in Canadians could not only create over a million new jobs but lift over a million Canadians out of poverty, they continued to make those same tired arguments and were rejected once again by Canadians.

We have demonstrated that fiscal responsibility, managing our finances properly while investing in Canadians, has been the responsible thing to do and has left us the fiscal firepower to invest in Canadians during this pandemic.

[Translation]

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

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

When we established specific rules, we agreed on a number of representatives from each political party who would sit, for a total of 32 members. I invite everyone to count. The NDP, the Bloc Québécois and the Green Party have the number agreed on; the others do not. Perhaps this is a matter of fairness or a matter of safety, or perhaps both. At the moment, it is not working. Not long ago, all parties had more than the number.

So what good is it to make agreements when we do not observe them? That is my comment. The government has made two very formal commitments. On April 29, it committed to create employment incentives for those receiving the Canada emergency response benefit, or CERB. That did not happen. However, it was said very clearly, and we certainly agreed on it.

Also...

The Chair: One moment, please. Mr. Kurek has a point of order.

[English]

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Mr. Chair, I believe it's consistent with parliamentary tradition not to comment on specific MPs who are or are not present within the House.

The Chair: It's interesting that you bring that up. It's a discussion I had while it was said.

I asked the table officers because it was said a bit in a round-about way, but it was not directly referring to anybody in the room or referring to a group; it was more about proportionality. It was kind of borderline, but it's not quite a point of order. It's not quite sustainable, but it is something that is a concern.

[Translation]

I am sorry, Mr. Blanchet. You may continue.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: Mr. Chair, there is certainly a difference between pointing out that someone is absent and pointing out that too many are present. That is the issue today.

The government has made two formal commitments in the House and it has not lived up to them. We pointed this out in the sense that, next Monday, we are going to have to vote together once more. In a communication, the government asked us what we wanted. Our party has proposals, as usual, so we pointed out very clearly what we want. We did so this morning, in a media briefing. The leaders have spoken together to discuss it.

So I suggest that we start from scratch. If we want to work something out for Monday that is good for the people of Quebec and Canada, everyone has to keep their word. Otherwise, it all makes no sense.

Can the Prime Minister tell us whether he is aware of the Bloc Québécois' proposals for everyone to keep their word in the House?

• (1300)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, it is very important to observe the commitments that have been made. I can assure the hon. member that, if ever there is a vote, whatever the number of members present in the debates or the committees, we will absolutely respect the figures that have been agreed on, so that Parliament can continue working as we maintain the proportions in the House.

Of course, in a period of crisis like this, it is extremely important that we continue to sit as parliamentarians in order to show Canadians that they can trust our institutions and our democracy. That is why the work continues to be done. We have been sitting three times a week for several weeks, twice by virtual means and once in person. In so doing, we can continue to debate important measures that we are putting in place for Canadians from coast to coast.

We are going to continue to work with all the parties in the House so that we can continue to demonstrate the strength of our institutions and our democracy in the face of this difficult situation. It is important to demonstrate that Canadians can trust their members of Parliament. That is exactly the work that were going to continue to do

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: I understood that the number of people was determined because of health considerations.

I repeat that the government has made two formal commitments and it has not lived up to them. If we are giving specific powers to the government and the government does not live up to its commitment, why should we continue to give it those specific powers. This is just a matter of good common sense.

We were asked in writing what we wanted and we said what we wanted. So I am asking the Prime Minister if he read what we wanted.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Absolutely, Mr. Chair. We will continue to work with all members in the House in order to better serve Canadians.

I must point out that the proposals to improve the Canada emergency response benefit made by the other parties, including those from the Bloc Québécois, are taken seriously. We have been able to significantly improve many of the measures that we have taken for Canadians.

As for the concern about fixed costs, I actually made an announcement this morning that small businesses may have access to assistance in order to pay their commercial rents. This is an important factor that the Bloc Québécois had pointed out and that small businesses also told us about directly.

We are going to continue to do everything we can do to help Canadians and small businesses.

The Chair: We now move on to Mr. Singh.

[English]

Mr. Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, NDP): Mr. Chair, this crisis has laid bare the reality that all Canadians need access to paid sick leave. No one should have to make the impossible choice between going to work sick or staying home and not having paid sick leave and not knowing how they're going to pay their bills.

Will the government, will the Prime Minister, commit today that all Canadians will have access to two weeks, at least, of paid sick leave?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, since the beginning of this pandemic, we have been working very closely with the provinces and territories on measures to put forward to help Canadians. There have been many good proposals that we've worked with the provinces on, including most recently the commercial rent subsidy, which we announced this morning. It's going to help thousands of small businesses right across the country with the pressures they're facing.

On supporting Canadians, that was the very first thing we did—

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Singh.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Provinces have called for it. Businesses have called for it. Will the Prime Minister commit today to two weeks, at least, of paid sick leave for all Canadians, yes or no?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, on this side of the House, we very much respect areas of provincial jurisdiction. That is why we are working with the provinces to respond to the needs that Canadians are facing that are within their jurisdictions. We are there to support the provinces—

• (1305)

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Singh.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, the government has released their plans to help big business. On that, we want to be very clear that the focus should be on maintaining, protecting and creating jobs in Canada. Will the government fix their proposal so that money goes to workers and not to enriching CEOs?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, thousands of Canadians across this country work for large enterprises. That's why we moved forward with the large employer emergency financing facility, which will give loans, with very strict conditions on executive pay and on environmental regulations, so that we are giving the help needed to Canadian workers.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, the plan allows for CEOs to get bonuses. The current plan proposed by the government allows CEOs to increase their pay. Will the government commit that not a single cent of public money will go to enriching CEOs, and that all public money will go directly to supporting jobs in Canada?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, the large employer emergency financing facility will help protect Canadian jobs and help Canadian businesses weather the current economic downturn, but employers will need to show that they intend to preserve employment and maintain investment activities, commit to respecting collective bargaining agreements and protecting workers' pensions, and require strict limits on dividends, share buy-backs and executive pay.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, will the Prime Minister commit to fixing the proposed plan to help big businesses so that if a business hides its money in an offshore tax haven, cheating the public, it will not get help, and instead help will be directed towards people, workers, and those who need the help right now?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, directing help to workers and people who need help right now is what this government has done since the beginning of this pandemic. With the Canada emergency response benefit helping over eight million Canadians, with the wage subsidy helping millions more, we are moving forward in ways that directly help workers. For large enterprises, the financing facility—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Singh.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, currently, there is no provision in the plan that the government has announced that would stop public money from going to a company that is purposely hiding its funds in an offshore account to not pay its full share of taxes.

Will the government commit to making sure money goes to workers, not to a company that is not paying its fair share of taxes?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, the honourable member knows that we have taken significant measures as a government to ensure that we're cracking down on tax avoidance and evasion, and have invested significant amounts in the Canada Revenue Agency to do that. The member opposite likes to speak in generalities, but if he has specific companies whose workers should not be helped, please, he should bring those names forward to the government.

The Chair: Mr. Singh, we have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: *[Inaudible—Editor]* company that has their money registered in an offshore tax haven should not get help, every single one.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, can he name one company where he thinks its employees should not get help from the government?

The Chair: Now we'll go on.

[Translation]

Mr. Berthold, the floor is yours.

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Mr. Chair, the cinema in Lac Mégantic has not received a cent from the government. Restaurant owners, hairdressers, dentists and massage therapists all across the country are sending us messages begging us to let them return to work. Here in Parliament, the Liberals, the Bloc, the New Democrats and the Greens are doing everything they in their power to not return to work. They are making agreements among themselves.

Why is the Prime Minister so insistent in staying at home, when thousands of Canadians are simply asking to return to work?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): I am sorry to learn that my colleague is not working, but I can assure him that all the other members in the House are working extremely hard. This includes all the MPs in their constituencies who are making calls each day to isolated seniors, and helping food banks.

All MPs are working extremely hard and I hope that my colleague will acknowledge that.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, a virtual haircut never turns out well. A virtual House is no different, as that shows.

Mr. Chair, we have not seen you in the Speaker's chair in the House of Commons for a real sitting here since at least March 12. During that time, the Liberals, the Bloc, the NDP and the Greens have been making agreements of all kinds among themselves so that we cannot ask real questions here.

If this was a real sitting of the House, the Prime Minister would be answering all the questions today, as he usually does every Wednesday in the House.

● (1310)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, I will not comment on the haircut portion of his question. As for the rest, I want to remind my colleague that we are here to answer questions. We answered questions yesterday and we will answer questions tomorrow.

Furthermore, when the House is sitting five days per week, there are normally five question periods of 45 minutes. Currently, from Tuesday to Thursday, there are seven periods of 45 minutes when the opposition can ask questions.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, the House is also called on to adopt bills and move them forward. We have not done that at all since this pandemic began, since you left your chair on March 12.

How many projects from the provinces are still waiting for approval? How many projects does the Minister of Infrastructure have on her desk and how many have been put aside?

Unfortunately, because of that, the economy cannot reopen.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I will happily send him the list of bills that have been passed. It is a long list. It starts with the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement, which was ratified on March 13. Then I could mention all the programs we have adopted here to help Canadians, such as the Canada emergency response benefit and the wage subsidy.

We have passed many bills here in the House. The work goes on.

Mr. Luc Berthold: We are in complete agreement that those bills were passed. We were here. However, we would like Parliament to resume its work.

For example, how can we reopen the economy while we are waiting to hear from the Minister of Infrastructure? The minister has not been here in the House very often. Unfortunately, I have many questions to ask her. She said she intended to grant 80% funding for municipal infrastructure projects.

When will we have a press release about that?

The Chair: The Right Honourable Prime Minister is raising a point of order.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Members know that they must not refer to anyone's presence in or absence from the House.

The Chair: The Right Honourable Prime Minister is correct. We bent the rules earlier, but this time it was fairly clear.

Let me remind all members that they must not refer to a member's presence in or absence from the House, especially in the current situation.

The honourable minister has the floor.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Actually, my colleague is helping me to demonstrate the importance of virtual sessions. Nearly all ministers are attending these sessions, and members can ask them questions and get responses directly.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, we learned last week that the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities caused some consternation in her government by announcing infrastructure measures that were not yet fully finalized, according to *La Presse*. The minister announced in the media that her department was speeding up the allocation of \$3 billion to modernize infrastructure such as hospitals and schools across Canada.

When will the Prime Minister confirm this announcement?

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry): Mr. Chair, I would like to thank my colleague for his question.

The Minister of Infrastructure and Communities is working closely with her provincial and territorial counterparts, municipal elected officials across Canada, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and public transit authorities to assess needs and priorities—

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

Mr. Luc Berthold: Will the 80% federal contribution apply to the more than 400 projects waiting, sitting idle on the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities' desk? Will it apply to all new

projects? Which municipalities will be granted 80% funding for projects? We have no answer.

For once, could I get a real answer, please?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, we will continue to work hard every day with our colleagues across Canada, particularly elected municipal officials. We will continue to find solutions that will help municipalities.

[English]

The Chair: We will continue with Ms. Rood.

Ms. Lianne Rood (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Chair, the Liberal government is letting down Canadian farmers. Stakeholders are unanimous: Government support for Canadian agriculture has been woefully inadequate. As a result, fruit and vegetable producers are cutting back their production by as much as 25%. This will have a profound impact on our food security.

Does the government know how much grocery prices will increase and the impact a smaller harvest will have on Canadian families as we have to rely on imported food?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank my colleague for giving me the opportunity to speak about the agricultural sector, an essential sector, and to thank all the workers, from farms to grocery stores.

In Canada, we have risk management programs to assist producers in all sectors. I invite producers to enrol, particularly in AgriStability, and to start by using the online calculator to find out how much they are eligible to receive.

• (1315)

[English]

Ms. Lianne Rood: Mr. Chair, the U.S. President made remarks about considering terminating trade deals that would require the United States to import cattle. This is extremely concerning for Canada's cattle industry.

Has the Minister of Agriculture spoken to her American counterparts regarding the remarks the U.S. President made on banning the import of Canadian beef, and will she stand up for Canadian cattle producers?

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, let me assure my colleague that I will always stand up for our producers across the country. I speak regularly with the Secretary of Agriculture, Mr. Perdue. I can assure you that we are doing everything needed to keep our food supply chain wide open, especially between Canada and the United States.

[English]

Ms. Lianne Rood: Mr. Chair, amid this pandemic the government has decided to evade Parliament and fundamentally alter our firearms laws with an order in council. The ban was based on many misconceptions that could have been brought to light through debate and expert testimony. Instead, the government circumvented Parliament and is setting a dangerous precedent for our democratic process.

Can the Prime Minister explain to my constituents why their voices and the voices of millions of Canadian law-abiding firearm owners were effectively muted by the government through its order in council?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Mr. Chair, I would like to advise the member that the law in Canada requires that the only way to prohibit any firearm is under section 117.15 of the Criminal Code. This has been the law in Canada since 1998. It was introduced by a Conservative government which required that all weapons to be proscribed had to be done by order in council. It was also a process that was used quite vigorously by the Harper government, so the member might be familiar with that action.

I would also remind the member that we promised Canadians we would prohibit these weapons.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Mr. Chair, high-speed Internet access is a necessity. In my rural riding of Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, many of my constituents are seeing skyrocketing connectivity costs amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Some constituents have told me they're spending over \$500 a month on Internet. While those in big cities are having data caps waived and costs frozen, the same is not true for rural Canada.

Why does the government think it's acceptable for my constituents to wait 10 years to get high-speed Internet access?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I appreciate my colleague's question.

We too believe that access to high-speed Internet is an essential reality in the 21st century. We had a plan before the pandemic, with \$6 billion in investments set aside to make it happen. It was the first plan of its kind for our country, by the way. That plan continues to be informed by the changes and the challenges that COVID has brought forward. We're going to work with all willing partners to move forward as quickly as possible to connect as many Canadians to high-speed Internet as we can.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Mr. Chair, small businesses are the backbone of our rural communities. Travel and tourism are huge economic drivers in my riding of Lambton—Kent—Middlesex. Small businesses rely on the May to September tourism season and are facing uncertainty about the success of their businesses as current aid programs don't work for seasonal businesses. The borders remain closed and tourists are forced to stay home, which is deeply affecting these businesses.

Can the minister tell us what the government's path forward is for opening our borders, and will the government promote domestic tourism to make up for the loss of our international tourists?

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages): Mr. Chair, I thank my colleague for this important question.

Of course we know that the tourism sector is hard hit, and we need to be there for tourism operators and different tourism entrepreneurs. That's exactly why we came up with some important measures, such as the wage subsidy and the \$40,000 CEBA loan, and also a new fund through the minister for the regional development agencies. This is to make sure that businesses that are falling through the cracks have access to funding.

If my colleague has specific cases in mind in her riding—

The Chair: The next question goes to Mr. Davidson.

Mr. Scot Davidson (York—Simcoe, CPC): Mr. Chair, months ago I alerted the Minister of Health to the lack of personal protective equipment available at River Glen Haven, a nursing home in my riding. It's a nursing home now in crisis. It has 62 residents and 27 staff who have tested positive, and 14 have died to date. I want the minister to understand, Mr. Chair, through you, that this is a nursing home that we grew up with in our community. I used to take Christmas cards there when I was in grade 3, and cards to vets. It's very important to our community.

I'd like to know what this government is doing currently to protect residents and staff of long-term care homes. How will they be provided the personal protective equipment they need?

• (1320)

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health): Mr. Chair, I share the member's horror at what's happened across our country in long-term care homes. The fact that so many of our seniors have perished through COVID-19 is truly a national tragedy.

As the member opposite knows, we've been working very closely with provinces and territories to make sure that long-term care homes have the personal protective equipment they need. We've also worked with the long-term care association to understand how that equipment is or isn't getting to their door.

I'll also remind the member that personal protective equipment is really only one layer of defence. We've been working with provinces and territories to ensure that they have the people they need and the financial resources they need to make changes that will protect all of the seniors in our lives.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Mr. Chair, we just had a call come out for gowns at the nursing home. They cannot source gowns right now. This is a crisis situation, and we are in need of them.

What is Canada's current stock on PPE, including gowns, in the national inventory? What is available in Canada right now?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, my honourable colleague is absolutely correct in his assessment that we are making efforts to procure the necessary PPE as well as build up domestic capacity.

With regard to gowns, I'd like to say that we have made significant orders in the millions. Right now, we have close to 600,000 gowns that have been received and we're working with the provinces and territories to make sure we distribute them in an equitable manner.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Mr. Chair, if there are that many in Ottawa now and the minister can tell me the location, I will gladly take some back to this nursing home when I leave.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, I understand the concern raised by the member opposite. We know the situation is very dire and challenging, particularly in our long-term care facilities. That is why we are working very closely with the provinces and territories to make PPE—

The Chair: Mr. Davidson.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Mr. Chair, 81% of deaths have occurred in long-term care homes. Is it time now for this government to commit to a national public inquiry into long-term care homes?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I think the member opposite has heard both me and the Prime Minister speak about the need to review how seniors are cared for in long-term care homes. We look forward to doing that work in partnership with the provinces and territories which, as the member knows, have the jurisdiction to deliver—

The Chair: Mr. Davidson.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Mr. Chair, I was out in the riding this week and I had many small business people and individuals trying to source PPE and paying exorbitant costs for it. I had business owners paying \$2 and \$3 each for surgical masks that they have to give out to their customers to get their businesses open.

I wonder what this government is doing currently about price gouging on PPE. Also, will the government commit to taking HST off PPE?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, we recognize that there's an enormous demand for personal protective equipment. That is why we mobilized industry in Canada. We had a call to action where over 6,000 companies stepped up with different solutions. Right now 700 different businesses are scaling and retooling to provide the appropriate personal protective equipment.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Mr. Chair, this country has recently been faced with floods, fires, ice storms and now a pandemic. Increasingly, our highly trained military is being called to get involved in domestic emergencies rather than in the traditional operations they were trained for. Canada has the best military in the world.

Will the government, as a suggestion, consider the establishment of a separate specialized force, under Public Safety, that is designed to respond to domestic national emergencies?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, I'm very proud to advise this House that the men and women in uniform in the Canadian Armed Forces have been answering the call. With regard to all of the provincial requests for assistance that we have received, the Canadian Armed Forces have responded to these requests and have provided that assistance. There are over 1,400 members now deployed, for example, in Quebec, helping in long-term care facilities, and 450 Canadian Armed Forces members in Ontario, helping in those facilities. They have been responding to those floods and fires.

We're grateful for their service, and we'll continue to be there for Canadians when they ask for our help.

The Chair: The next question goes to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, this week the government was expected to release seven items pertaining to the massacre in Nova Scotia, including four search warrants, two production orders and a closed warrant. That did not happen. Instead, we received a single highly redacted document.

A crisis is not an excuse to hide information from Canadians. In fact, it's more important now than ever for the government to be open and transparent. Why are the Liberals using this pandemic to withhold information about this tragic crime?

• (1325)

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, the member's assertion is completely incorrect. In fact, our government does not in any way interfere with ongoing criminal investigations conducted by the RCMP. They are engaged in a very robust and vigorous investigation. We know that the people of Nova Scotia and Canadians want answers to the questions about what happened in this terrible and tragic event. The RCMP will continue their investigation.

We're working very closely with the Province of Nova Scotia to make sure that Canadians get the answers they need.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, the families of the victims, Nova Scotians and all Canadians deserve answers as to how and why this incident occurred in the way that it did. When will all of this information finally be made transparent and public?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, I am absolutely confident that at the conclusion of the RCMP investigation, when the investigation is complete and the facts are known, the information will be made available to Nova Scotians and to Canadians. We're working very closely with the Nova Scotia government. I'm in constant contact with the attorney general, as recently as yesterday, to ensure that the information is available when it's—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, Prime Minister Trudeau is having a waterfront mansion built at Harrington Lake at taxpayers' expense while the existing mansion is renovated. Can't he just stay at home during the renovations? How much are Canadian taxpayers on the hook for?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, I have difficulty understanding what that has to do with the subject we are debating, that is, the pandemic issue.

The Chair: That is a good point.

[*English*]

Before I start the clock again and go back to Mr. Barrett, I want to reply to that question.

We've been sitting here for the last number of sessions, and occasionally I've seen people go off into different tangents. I want to remind honourable members that this committee has to do with things relating to COVID-19. Questions have been asked that have been off topic and answers have been given to some of those questions.

I want to caution both sides on this. If you hear something that isn't quite COVID-related, please let us know and don't answer. If you ask a question that isn't on COVID-19, please realize it before we have to reprimand you. That way we can keep this flowing well.

Mr. Barrett, a question.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, I object to you referring to my question as a tangent. It is pertinent to all Canadians. I do believe this is a point of personal privilege and it should not be deducted from my time, because Canadians want answers to more than just the questions from the journalists selected by the PMO when the Prime Minister pops out of the cottage every morning.

The *Hollywood Squares* version of the House of Commons is not what Canadians expect. They want oversight. They want accountability. They elected parliamentarians. They elected an official opposition to hold the government to account, and that's why we're here today.

The Chair: I want to remind the honourable members that although we're not in a parliamentary session, we do have a certain amount of respect, so when referring to people, please do it respectfully. We are in a committee that is limited, and it can be enforced that we only deal with items dealing with COVID-19. I just want to remind everyone that this is a committee. This is not a session of Parliament.

Mr. Barrett, I'll let you continue. You have two minutes and 37 seconds left.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, my question for Prime Minister Trudeau is why, during COVID-19, like all times under his government, the Liberals only tell the truth when they get caught. Why did they try to hide the cost of this mansion from Canadians?

• (1330)

The Chair: Again, I want to remind honourable members that you cannot do indirectly what you can't do directly. Accusing someone of something is not parliamentary language, even if it is a committee.

Do we have a point of order?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I would simply like to emphasize that we must stay within the scope of committee business.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Barrett, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, I fail to understand what your intervention was there on behalf of the government, because my questions are pertinent. These are questions that Canadians have. The government is not tabling a fiscal update. It is not giving us a budget. During COVID-19, Canadians expect us to get answers from the government about what it spends money on.

My questions are pertinent. They are on topic. The government's not being interested in answering them is typical 365 days a year, not just during this pandemic. I fail to understand how it's not relevant for me to ask about the money the government is spending when it fails to update this House and this committee in an appropriate way.

Mr. Chair, I'm certainly at a loss on how you expect us to hold the government to account and how you expect committee members to question the government when we have to filter through a narrow channel that is approved again by the PMO. This is very disappointing. I can tell you that many Canadians would be disappointed that our questions for the government have to be approved by you, so if in future I ought to submit them in advance—

An hon. member: For shame.

The Chair: For shame is right.

Ms. Dancho, please.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Mr. Chair, after two months of the Conservatives advocating for small businesses that were being left behind by this government, yesterday we finally received word from the Liberals that the Canada emergency business loan would be expanded to include employers that pay their employees with contracts and dividends. Hallelujah for small businesses, Mr. Chair.

Despite the praise from the Ottawa press gallery, many businesses are still being left behind, like my constituent Svetlana, who owns a hair salon that has been shut down for months. She needs the commercial rent assistance, but her landlord refuses to sign up for the program. Will the government expand and streamline the commercial rent assistance, or will it continue to ignore business owners like Svetlana?

Hon. Mona Fortier (Minister of Middle Class Prosperity and Associate Minister of Finance): Mr. Chair, yesterday was a great day, and we continue to expand the CEBA program to support businesses across the country. We have been listening to businesses as to how we can support them, and we will continue to find ways to support all Canadians, workers and businesses.

This is a very difficult time, and our government has put forth many programs in a very short period. We will continue to work on these programs and focus on Canadians.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): The honourable member for Kildonan—St. Paul.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: That's not so much an answer, Madam Chair, as it is self-praise, but let's try again.

James is a restaurant owner in my riding who has had sales decline by 65%, just short of the 70% threshold needed to receive the commercial rent assistance. A 65% decline is devastating to him and his employees, but it's not devastating enough for the Liberals to throw him a bone and help him with his rent. Why does the Liberal government continue to pick favourites and exclude thousands and thousands of businesses across Canada with arbitrary red tape?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, I want to again raise the fact that since day one, our government has been focusing on Canadians, on workers and on businesses. We have many programs to support Canadians, workers and businesses. Just yesterday we expanded again our CEBA program to make it available to businesses with dividends and contractors.

We will continue to look at the gaps and work with all members in the House to see how we can make sure we make those programs available for Canadians.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Yet again, Madam Chair, a long-time chiropractor in my riding is using a personal banking account rather than an additional business banking account, and isn't eligible for any government programs as a result.

Why does the Liberal government believe businesses like this are undeserving of their support, and that others, such as the 200,000 fraudulent CERB claimants, are deserving of their support instead? Why is that, Madam Chair?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, through you, I want to raise the fact that, yes, we know we need to find potential solutions to help business owners and entrepreneurs who operate through their personal bank account and have not yet filed their tax returns, such as newly created businesses. We expanded the CEBA program yesterday by making it available for dividends and contractors. We will continue to work with all members of Parliament and businesses to find ways to support them through this difficult time.

• (1335)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Chair, that's not an answer yet again. Businesses in my riding are waiting for a response, and this is all that they're hearing. It's despicable. There is no answer yet again.

The list of perfectly legitimate businesses that are falling through the cracks continues to grow, and the employees who depend on

these jobs are seeing their opportunities evaporate along with them. Canadians are seeing their favourite neighbourhood businesses go bankrupt and close permanently, and all this Liberal government has told them is, "Sorry, you're not eligible."

Further, this government has spent over \$200 billion in debt on the pandemic response effort, and yet they refuse to allow Parliament to operate effectively. They won't even release a financial update. It's ridiculous.

Instead, we have this pale shadow of a Parliament that once was, with a fraction of the accountability it once had. Canadians have a right to know the damage that's been done and the magnitude of the decisions happening now. Those answers should come from Parliament, just as they always have for over 150 years.

Although the other parties seem happy to avoid their responsibilities to Canadians, the Conservative opposition will be here fighting to hold the Liberal government to account every chance we get. It is our duty to Canadians, and I'm honoured to contribute to that effort relentlessly on behalf of my constituents.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Madam Chair, the government is answering questions every day, for actually the equivalent of seven QPs—seven times 45 minutes instead of five times 45 minutes—way more. Why? It's extremely important for the government to answer important questions from the opposition, and we'll keep doing that.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Does the government support an independent international inquiry regarding this pandemic?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs): Madam Chair, the government was very clear at the recent general assembly of the WHO that we do support a post-crisis review. That's the right thing to do. Canada is behind it.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Madam Chair, does the government agree that an independent inquiry must be independent of WHO control and able to review all WHO records?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Madam Chair, our government has been very clear, working together with our allies, co-sponsoring an EU-sponsored resolution, that we do believe a post-crisis review is the right thing to do.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Madam Chair, my question was very clear. Does the government agree that an independent inquiry must be independent of WHO control and able to review all WHO records?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Madam Chair, my answer was also very clear, which is that Canada, working together with our closest allies, such as the EU, has been very clear that we support a post-crisis review.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Madam Chair, that was the answer to the first question I asked, not the second question I asked, but I have another one on the record that I think is clear. Does the government agree that an independent inquiry must be able to access affected areas within China and conduct private interviews with witnesses in China?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Madam Chair, our government has been very clear and has been working effectively with our strongest democratic allies in the world, such as the EU. We believe a post-crisis review is absolutely necessary. We will continue pushing for that.

Let me just say that right now we're focusing on fighting the coronavirus in Canada.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Madam Chair, again, that wasn't the question I asked.

Another minister has said that it's not the WHO's job to evaluate the quality of the data that is given by member states. I want to ask if the Deputy Prime Minister believes the same about the work of the International Atomic Energy Agency or the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Madam Chair, let me be extremely clear about our government's public position taken just a few days ago, which is that we support an independent and comprehensive review of the WHO response to the pandemic. We're working with our allies to get that done, and we will.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree with her colleague Minister Gould, who said that it's not the responsibility of the WHO to evaluate the quality of the data they receive from member states?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I think that I have been extremely clear about the government's position when it comes to the WHO. Canada is working closely with our democratic partners to ensure there is an independent and comprehensive post-crisis review, and one will happen. We'll make sure it does.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I've asked five or six questions, and the minister keeps repeating her answer to the first question I asked but not to any of the others.

Has the government applied any pressure to the WHO to encourage representatives to testify before Canada's health committee?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Madam Chair, the work of parliamentary committees is independent, as it ought to be, and we support the work of all of our parliamentary committees, including calling the witnesses whom they would like to interview.

• (1340)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Of course the health committee is independent, but the government should ensure that the WHO understands how important it is that multilateral organizations that receive money from Canadian taxpayers are willing to be accountable to Canadian parliamentary committees when those witnesses are summoned.

Has the government conveyed to the WHO the importance of a multilateral organization that receives significant Canadian funding to be willing to give testimony before Canadian parliamentary committees during a time of crisis?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Let me just say this: The government supports the work of our parliamentary committees very much, including the health committee, and the health committee has the right to call witnesses it believes are necessary for its work. When it comes to the WHO, our Minister of International Development has spoken directly with the leader of the WHO and made it clear that a post-crisis review is the right thing, and Canada is calling for it.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: She's not too great at the issue of the parliamentary committee.

Experts as well as our British and American allies are reporting China-based hackers are trying to steal research and intellectual property related to COVID-19. In that light, why is this government funding research partnerships related to COVID-19 between the U of A and the Wuhan Institute of Virology?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable parliamentary...the minister. Sorry.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I was a parliamentary secretary one time. It's an honour.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): You have 30 seconds, please.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: When it comes to intellectual property, we're the first government to introduce a national intellectual property strategy. We understand that we need to support our researchers and scientists and make sure they have the ability to see those benefits right here in Canada for Canadians. We'll also continue to work with our allies.

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Beloeil—Chambly has the floor.

[English]

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We have a point of order for the honourable member for Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Do I have 30 seconds?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): No, there is no time left at all. Actually, there was a little extra that I gave the minister to respond.

[Translation]

The honourable member for Beloeil—Chambly has the floor.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: Madam Chair, I have been hearing esteemed colleagues express tonsorial concerns. I am pleased to say to those living in Quebec that, as of June 1, we will be able to tame our luxuriant locks and lighten the weight of our presence here.

For my part, I would like to express my confidence in the media, which is working hard to provide Quebecers with information. I strictly avoid any anxiety ranging from persecution to paranoia. However, our support for the exceptional measures was, of course, contingent upon the fulfillment of a number of commitments. I repeat, with the utmost seriousness, that if the commitments are not kept and we are not told when, how and how much within a reasonable time frame, on Monday, we will not vote in favour of extending the special measures. Why grant special powers if the commitments made under those powers are not honoured?

For example, the Deputy Prime Minister made a very formal commitment in the House to introduce an employment incentive mechanism, so that people would be allowed to earn \$1,000 over and above the \$1,000 without being penalized in terms of the CERB. Then, to ensure that people do not just work part time and as a transitional measure toward economic recovery, we insist that recipients keep half of their earnings over and above the \$1,000.

To ensure that the government keeps its word and that we can once again work together on Monday, what are the Deputy Prime Minister's thoughts on this measure, which would be helpful for her as well?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (President of the Treasury Board): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I must say I do not have the same tonsorial concerns as my colleague opposite. Everything is going very well for me, but we warmly applaud the Quebec government's announcement regarding June 1.

I would like to add that we are very aware that this extraordinarily important emergency measure, the Canada emergency response benefit, was rolled out quickly. From the outset, we announced that it was an emergency measure and that it was also intended to evolve. That is what we are going to do over the next few weeks.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: Let's talk about evolution. There is a fairly broad consensus in economic circles, particularly among chambers of commerce and seasonal industries. They are very concerned that this measure, in its current form, could slow the economic recovery by creating a gap between those who receive the benefit and those who work. There needs to be a transition.

Not so long ago, last week, actually, the government experienced a moment of confusion. Three government spokespersons were saying that those who were afraid to return to work did not have to go back, while three others were saying the opposite, that they had to. In the end, the minister ruled on the matter. The solution to this deep existential issue is, in fact, an employment incentive, so that all those who are not afraid to return to work can do so, knowing that the CERB is temporary.

Has the minister considered our thoughtful proposal?

● (1345)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, not only did we hear them loud and clear, but we also fully understood the proposals from all members of the House, including those from the Bloc Québécois, of course. We are very open. We know that much work still needs to be done, despite the emergency wage subsidy and the temporary wage supplement for lower income essential workers,

which we announced to support the provinces. We are making \$3 billion available to the provinces to help raise the wages of workers in essential services.

We feel that all of that, including the wage subsidy and other measures, will help to foster economic recovery. We will, however, remain focused on worker health and safety.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: I felt a little emotional when I read a letter in which the government acknowledged the Bloc Québécois' role in many of the measures implemented. We would like to keep up that momentum so we can reach an agreement on Monday. Indeed, if we do not get a serious answer, we will not come to an agreement on Monday.

I repeat my question: yes or no, have you thought about the 50% of earnings over \$1,000? It will matter on Monday.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Please provide a brief answer, Minister.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The answer is that we are listening to all members of the House, including members of the Bloc Québécois, as well as to all business, social and community groups, who are sharing their suggestions with us.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Thérèse-De Blainville has the floor.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Madam Chair.

On Monday, April 20, we passed some motions. One of them read as follows:

e) the government ensure that the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) are offered in a manner that meets their objective while encouraging employment in all circumstances;

A student who works 18 hours a week at minimum wage will make the same income as one who works 43 hours a week, also at minimum wage. Which option do you think students will choose?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: This allows me to focus on the fate of our young people. I am an economist. Many economists have studied the impact of economic crises on young people and youth. The impact is terrible. Current conditions in Canada may have an extraordinarily damaging effect on academic retention rates for these students, on their future, on their careers and on their wage progression.

This financial assistance is important, not only because it provides income support, but also because it can help them, as far as possible, to find a job. It could be part-time employment, an internship or volunteer work.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Chair, I have no doubt that they care about students and young people. However, they could add about \$1,000 in income to the Canada emergency student benefit, which is about \$1,250 a month and which came into effect Friday. Part of that goes to support the student and part of it helps him or her to earn an income.

The issue is clear. As I said in the House on April 20, we currently have an all-or-nothing policy. Those who make \$1,001 lose the student support they need. That was why we tabled our proposal, our motion.

Can we make this much-needed measure into an incentive to employment? In its current form, its effect is to discourage. Where, when and how can we make it into an incentive?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, the member is absolutely right. There are two parts to this assistance: \$1,250 for the student and up to \$2,000 for those with a disability or a dependent. Employed students can keep up to \$1,000 of the CESB.

In addition, we announced 70,000 jobs under Canada Summer Jobs, for which the conditions have been relaxed. Finally, 116,000 jobs will be available so that young people can continue to flourish.

• (1350)

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Chair, everyone reads the news and recognizes that we will have a recovery and a transition.

Some employers offer work for two days a week that may result in someone earning \$1,000 a month. However, due to the recovery, employers may ask staff to work overtime or an extra day or two.

The government needs to realize what a dilemma that puts these individuals in. They will have to choose between helping out at work and losing the CESB's \$1,250. That was the reason for the motion and we want answers about it.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, it is very important that we discuss the situation for young people. Six million Canadians have lost their jobs or a large part of their income in the past few weeks. Many of them are young people. In Quebec, the youth unemployment rate is currently 34%. Before the crisis, it was 9%.

In Canada, 2.1 million post-secondary students are going to have a lot of trouble finding work in the coming weeks. We need to help them out so that, after the crisis, they can help us to reopen the economy.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The member has 25 seconds left.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Chair, the government is not answering the question.

Everybody wants to help out young people. However, if the government does not adopt the motion, it is not helping them, it is hurting them.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The Minister has 10 seconds to answer the question.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, we will always be happy to work with opposition members because we know that this issue is of concern to us all.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie has the floor.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Madam Chair, despite the pandemic, municipalities are maintaining essential services for our fellow citizens. Yet they are currently on the brink of financial disaster.

Recently, the mayors of Quebec's major cities, along with the FCM and the UMQ, have made several requests for assistance. Mayor Plante says she is going to end up with a huge bill and she does not know where she will find the money.

Because cities do not have the option of running deficits, I ask again: where will Mayor Plante find \$250 million to \$500 million?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Madam Chair, I thank my colleague for his question. It is a very important issue.

I spoke with Mayor Plante on Friday. I agree with her and with the mayors across the country that municipalities continue to play an essential role, especially when it comes to reopening our country. Municipalities, public transit and everything else will be essential for us.

That is why we encourage municipalities to work with the provinces. We are prepared to work with the provinces to support municipalities.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Madam Chair, it is very nice to hear that, but we are anxious to see a solution and money for the municipalities. This is urgent.

As for public transit, we have seen a collapse in ridership and in the revenue of public transit companies. In Montreal, the losses are more than 90%. Cities will need public transit for the recovery, just like our economy.

Since public transit companies do not have access to the wage subsidy, what will we do to help them pay their employees so that they can be there to provide the services that people need?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Madam Chair, once again, I fully agree that this is a very important issue for our country. Our government is prepared to work closely with municipalities. The issue of public transit is absolutely essential to the recovery of the economy.

I also want to note that it is very important that municipalities continue to work with the provinces, which have the primary responsibility for municipalities. The federal government will be there as well.

I encourage all members of Parliament to have talks with the provinces.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Madam Chair, speaking of dragging feet, for two years, Quebec mayors have been waiting for Quebec and Canada to sign the agreement on social housing. In fact, Quebec is the only province that has not yet signed this agreement. In the meantime, \$1.5 billion is waiting to be spent in Quebec to build social housing.

My question is simple: what is happening?

• (1355)

Hon. Jean-Yves Ducloux: I am very grateful to the member opposite for allowing me to talk about housing and to say how strong the first record of the Canadian government on housing has been.

For example, we have invested \$55 billion, which, among other things, has made it possible to reduce homelessness by 50% in Canada, including Quebec, of course. We have lifted 530,000 people out of housing conditions that are unacceptable for a developed country like Canada.

We look forward to signing this agreement with the Government of Quebec to ensure that Quebecers get their full share.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: We do not need a fight about our flags right now; we need social housing. Thousands of people are on waiting lists. Send the money to the Government of Quebec, we will invest it in the AccèsLogis program and we will solve the problems by next year.

Right now, we all recognize that health care workers are putting their lives on the line and making sacrifices to care for the sick and the elderly in particular. Some of these workers are refugee protection claimants who arrived recently, mainly through Roxham Road. Those people have no status, but they are risking their lives for us and for our seniors.

What is the government going to do to give them status as quickly as possible so that they can stay in Quebec and Canada?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. minister has 35 seconds to respond.

Hon. Jean-Yves Ducloux: I would need a lot more time to be as empathetic and eloquent as my colleague on this issue. Yes, it is extraordinarily important to say that all workers in Quebec, particularly in long-term health care, have a very difficult but also a very important task, which is to take care of our seniors. We are very grateful to them.

We in the Government of Canada will continue to work very hard with Quebec to ensure that everyone can provide these important services in a way that is safe for everyone.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Madam Chair, as members of Parliament, we all have an obligation to Canadians, whether in our ridings or here in Ottawa. However, many people—including the Liberal Party, first of all, and the Bloc Québécois—are opposed to a return to Parliament on May 25.

Yes, to be honest with my colleague Mr. Blanchet, the Bloc Québécois has put economic conditions on reaching an agreement. However, the only condition we should consider for a return to Parliament is public health.

For the time being, as we can see, it is easy to have more members come and do our job and ask our government colleagues questions. They have had a big smile on their faces from the beginning, because they are fine with the way we are working right now, but there are other things to do.

I would like to know why the Prime Minister, during the current pandemic, is phoning prime ministers and presidents around the

world for support for a seat on the UN Security Council. Does he consider a seat at the UN more important than a seat in Ottawa?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: The Prime Minister of Canada understands that this is a historic moment for Canada and for the world, and he understands the importance of Canada's voice in this historic moment.

After World War II, Canada did some important work in creating the postwar international order. Canada must and can do similar work now. That is why the Prime Minister is making those calls.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: The Deputy Prime Minister is not really answering my question. In my opinion, the priority is Canada. That is why we are here today and why we want to come back more often.

I would like to ask the Minister of Public Safety a question about the border. We hear in the media that a number of couples in which Canadians are married to Americans cannot be together because of border restrictions. However, border officers have also been given a document that mentions possible exemption scenarios. There would be some flexibility.

Could the minister clarify this and tell us how many Canadians cannot be with their spouses right now?

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will go to honourable Minister Blair.

Hon. Bill Blair: Madam Chair, I think this is a very important question. As the member knows, our government has made an effort to flatten the curve. We've had to take a number of extraordinary measures at our borders, including restricting non-essential travel.

While Canadian citizens and permanent residents are always admissible and are required to quarantine upon entry, foreign nationals, of course, are subject to travel restrictions. For any individuals to be eligible to travel to Canada, they have to demonstrate that their travel is in fact essential.

We recognize that many people are making significant sacrifices. It is not our intention in any way to separate families, but the border officers are faced with situations that have to be decided on a case-by-case basis. It depends entirely on the information provided to the border officer, who determines whether or not the travel is indeed essential.

• (1400)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: The Prime Minister knows that highway 344 in the Oka region is currently blocked by the Mohawks of Kanesatake. Families in the Oka region are having to take long detours because the Mohawks are maintaining their barricade.

Is there any way the federal government can talk to the Mohawks and make them listen to reason?

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Indigenous Services): Madam Chair, let us first set the record straight. It is not a barricade, it is a safety checkpoint. The safety of indigenous communities is critical. I have been informed that the band council has set up road checkpoints to protect the residents from COVID-19 in the context of the reopening plan launched by the Government of Quebec.

I am aware that this situation raises concerns both inside and outside the community. Indigenous Services Canada, my department, is working with the appropriate authorities, including the band council, the Government of Quebec and the Sûreté du Québec, to find a fair and safe solution to this situation.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Madam Chair, we now see that the order in council that was issued to ban firearms in Canada is specifically for purging black weapons. We see that some .22s are banned from Canada simply because they are black, while the same .22 calibre firearm, when it is brown, is not banned.

Can the minister explain the purpose of banning everything black when we know full well that a .22 calibre firearm is not an assault weapon?

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable minister has 27 seconds to respond.

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, Madam Chair, that is absolutely incorrect. We have not banned any .22 rifles. The weapons that we banned are all consistently weapons of military design. They have no place in civil society, they are not used for sporting or hunting purposes, and they are now prohibited.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I just want to remind members that there are opportunities for questions and that they don't need to help the minister or help their colleagues at all.

We will go to the honourable member for Saskatoon West.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Madam Chair, when the government rolled out programs to help individuals and businesses deal with COVID-19, it pegged the cost of those programs at \$151 billion.

Can the government confirm that those are still the estimated costs of the program?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, I want to share with the honourable member that we have many programs that are currently supporting businesses, individuals and Canadians, and we will continue to prioritize these Canadians during this economic emergency.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I'm glad to hear there are many programs, and we've all been working with them. I'm assuming that you've been collecting them and I am asking if the government has collected together the costs of these programs and could provide estimates of these costs.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We are in very extraordinary times and we will continue to support Canadians. It would be impossible to provide a clear economic projection at this time, but we will continue to be open and transparent about the actions we are taking to support families, individuals and businesses.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Madam Chair, a competent finance minister can not only help colleagues to implement programs but can also make sure the costs of these programs are understood and communicated.

Does the finance minister or the government have any clue as to what our deficit is going to be this year?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, through you, I would like to again tell the honourable member that we are focusing on Canadian individuals and businesses at this time, and we will continue to provide these supports with the CEBA program, the wage subsidy and all the other measures that we've been bringing forward to support Canadians during this economic emergency.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Madam Chair, all of us in this House are very committed to helping Canadians. That is not the question.

The PBO estimated this year's deficit at \$252 billion. Can the minister confirm that number?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, I would like to inform the honourable member that we know that over eight million Canadians have had access to the CERB at this time, over two million Canadians have had access to the wage subsidy, and we are also providing over 600,000 loans with the CEBA program.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I believe that the Department of Finance is filled with highly competent and skilled people. Is the minister telling this House that the finance department is incapable of producing a budget?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Honestly, our finance department has been working 24 hours a days, seven days a week to provide supports for Canadians to individuals, workers and businesses.

• (1405)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Madam Chair, when can the people of Canada expect an economic update from the government?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, again, while it would be impossible to provide a clear economic projection at this time, we will continue to be open and transparent about the actions we are taking for Canadians.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Madam Chair, I was a finance executive for many years and I know that preparing budgets is complicated. Is the finance minister no longer producing economic updates? Is he saying that he can't figure out the numbers, or is the government leaving that to the PBO?

When will the government stop letting down Canadians and provide an economic update?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, honestly, we have been providing support for Canadians, workers and businesses throughout this crisis and we will continue to do so because we believe we are in a strong fiscal position. We will help these businesses to recover when it is time.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: On Saturday the CBC reported that “a senior government official said internal modelling suggests it will take several years at least before Ottawa’s fiscal track returns to pre-pandemic levels.” Is the minister privy to her own department’s modelling?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Madam Chair, as the member opposite knows, the situation is incredibly fluid and dynamic. We’re examining all of the relevant economic factors, but our number one priority remains investing in Canadians and their well-being economically, and also in terms of their health.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Will the federal debt reach \$1 trillion this year?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, again I would like to provide the honourable member with the fact that we are in an emergency situation. Currently we are providing supports for Canadians, businesses and workers, and we will continue to do so.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): There are 10 seconds left. Does the member have a quick question?

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Yes. Does the government know what the debt is going to be this year?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will have a brief answer from the minister.

Hon. Mona Fortier: We are working on supporting Canadians at this time.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will go now to the honourable member for Markham—Unionville.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to take a moment to thank the front-line workers from coast to coast to coast who are putting themselves at risk to save lives. I have seen it first-hand in Markham. My community has been hit hard by COVID-19, as several seniors homes have reported deaths from the virus. On Friday, the Markham Stouffville Hospital declared an outbreak. When I dropped off PPE at some of these locations, front-line workers told me they have been working seven days a week. I am truly thankful for their dedication, Madam Chair.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Bob Saroya: Madam Chair, hopefully I will get my five minutes from here onward.

I have spoken to many business owners, including owners of Tim Hortons and McDonald’s, and the employees are worried about taking too many shifts and losing access to CERB. This is creating labour shortages.

Can the government commit to making CERB more flexible so that hard-working employees are no longer punished?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, I also have in my riding very hard-working people, many of them working at relatively low wages and in difficult circumstances. I also want to salute them, through you, Madam Chair.

I also want to add that we were and still are in an emergency. That’s why we put CERB in place, the Canada emergency response

benefit, which is helping eight million Canadians at this very time, with a total of 12 million applications. We knew from the start that this would be an emergency measure and we are looking forward to making it evolve, as we should, as the situation evolves.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Madam Chair, the question was about whether people want to work. Because of the \$1,000 threshold, people are not taking jobs. Therefore, businesses are short of labour. Can something be done so that businesses and employees can go side by side?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, although we understand that this is a very important benefit for millions of Canadians and their families, we also understand that many workers will want to take a job if a job is available, because we all understand that unemployment is high in Canada. It will remain high for a little while, so we have full confidence that Canadians will be able to find jobs if the opportunities exist.

● (1410)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Madam Chair, while I support crisis relief programs, there are clear issues that need to be resolved. One of the most obvious is the Canada emergency commercial rent assistance program. Many landlords are not interested in this program. Some landlords are hoping that their tenants will take out loans just to pay rent. When will the government make this program more flexible?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, this is an unprecedented challenge, and I know that many are having to make sacrifices they never imagined they’d have to make. Our government is asking landlords to do their part and help tenants like the one he’s mentioning to get through this. Many landlords have already stepped up, and we commend their efforts. We will continue to work with this program.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Madam Chair, before COVID-19, Markham was thriving and there was almost no commercial space available for businesses, and rents were high. Now those businesses are trying to pay high rent with a fraction of their customers. Unfortunately, the government rent relief only covers businesses that have lost 70% of their sales. Some businesses have lost 65% of their sales. How does the government expect them to pay rent?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, this program will be delivered in partnership with provinces and territories. This program will provide forgivable loans to commercial property owners, who in turn will lower the rent for their tenants by 75%.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member has 35 seconds to ask a question.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Madam Chair, even with COVID-19, shootings continue in the GTA. Last year, there were 292 victims of gun violence in Toronto alone. Many of these shootings were gang-related. Toronto police chief Mark Saunders has said that the majority of the guns used in these crimes were smuggled over the border. Is the Minister of Public Safety aware that smuggled weapons are used for this violence, yes or no?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Please give a very brief answer, Minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, of course we are aware that many weapons are smuggled into the country, but we are also aware that there are many guns here that, tragically, have been used in crimes. We are taking effective action to keep guns out of the hands of criminals, regardless of their source.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will go now to the honourable member for Battle River—Crowfoot.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. It's good to be back in Parliament.

Over the last number of weeks, I've heard a great deal of frustration from constituents about firearms. They have expressed outrage, disappointment and fear that the government would use a tragedy that took place in the midst of a global crisis to further its political agenda. I have a few questions about this.

Can the Minister of Public Safety confirm if they have found any errors in the firearms reclassification OIC, yes or no?

Hon. Bill Blair: Madam Chair, in response to that, I would remind the member that unfortunately during this COVID crisis, we've seen an increase in gun violence. We've seen a significant increase in domestic violence, and tragically, we've even seen a mass shooting. All the while, there is a proliferation of weapons totally unsuitable for civil society, which continue to be sold. We have taken action to end that proliferation and we have prohibited those weapons.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Madam Chair, I urge the minister to be careful with the words he uses, because a weapon is something used with intent. We're talking about firearms, specifically firearms owned by law-abiding Canadians.

Can the minister share how many staff in his office and the department were assigned to work on these regulatory changes in the midst of a global crisis?

Hon. Bill Blair: Madam Chair, this is a wonderful opportunity to commend the hard-working men and women of Public Safety and in my ministry office, who, notwithstanding the many challenges of this COVID pandemic, have responded and continue to do the work that is necessary to keep Canadians safe, for which all Canadians should be grateful.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Maybe a freedom of information request will shed some light on that.

Can the minister share the date when the government had originally planned to make these changes?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Please give a brief answer, Minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: Madam Chair, the member may remember that we campaigned on this issue and we made a commitment to Canadians that we would take action on it. We brought forward the order in council on May 1, and we have fulfilled our promise.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Canadians, specifically law-abiding firearms owners and anybody who's concerned about executive overreach, have far more questions than answers on this issue.

Will the minister accept a province's constitutional right to appoint its own chief firearms officer, yes or no?

• (1415)

Hon. Bill Blair: The Government of Canada will always uphold Canadian law and the Firearms Act. I would invite the member opposite to perhaps offer some explanation of why he believes these weapons, which were designed for soldiers to kill other soldiers in combat, are suitable for use in civil society.

Mr. Damien Kurek: I'm happy to answer that question. Using Liberal logic, I would expect that the minister will also ban something like rental vehicles and kitchen knives, maybe even baseball bats.

I'll go on to my next question. There are many businesses in my constituency that are falling through the cracks and don't qualify for the supports offered by the government. Certain businesses were denied the CEBA, yet they breathed a sigh of relief last week when the RRRF was announced, only to be denied again. This was supposed to be a fix, yet once again Canadian businesses were let down by the government.

Can the Liberals commit to reach out and fix the gaps that exist in these programs?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Actually, Madam Chair, yesterday we did fill one of those gaps by making businesses with dividends and contracts able to have access to CEBA. We will continue to look at those gaps and work with the honourable member to make our programs available for businesses.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Madam Chair, I look forward to a phone call so that those gaps can be specifically addressed.

Many of my constituents, including members of my family, are working hard on farms and ranches across Canada to ensure that our food supply chain is secure. Can the Minister of Agriculture explain why her government is letting down so many producers by not providing the certainty they need in these uncertain times?

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Madam Chair, in Canada we are fortunate to have a wide range of risk management programs with which producers were already familiar before this crisis began. I invite them to apply for those programs, including AgriStability. They can already go online to see how much money they are entitled to.

[English]

Mr. Damien Kurek: Madam Chair, there's still a lack of certainty in the industry. There was an article published in The Hill Times by the Information Commissioner saying that the federal government needs to send a serious message to its departments about freedom of information requests.

Can the government commit to making sure freedom of information requests during this COVID pandemic are still honoured and that privacy doesn't take a back seat?

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. minister has the floor to respond quickly.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, I can assure him that, despite the very difficult situation we are going through, the Information Commissioner and the Government of Canada as a whole are very aware of how important it is to maintain access to information.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. member for Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes-Verchères has the floor.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

For a number of weeks and even months now, I have been receiving emails and calls from constituents who are angry about not being able to get a refund for a trip they did not take. Why can't they?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, I thank my colleague for raising this matter. Yes, it is quite frustrating for many people to not be able to get a refund for a ticket when they paid for it and booked it. That said, we are also aware of the difficult situation facing airlines. That is why we will continue to monitor the situation.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Knowing that a company like Air Canada has \$6 billion set aside and that \$2.6 billion of that money belongs to its customers, can we really believe that it will be forced into bankruptcy if it reimburses its customers?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, once again, I would like to acknowledge that the hon. member is right. It is difficult for clients who have booked and paid for a ticket to face the current situation. It is certainly frustrating not to be able to get a refund. We recognize that this is a difficult situation for all airlines and we encourage them to follow the regulations and the law on this matter.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Madam Chair, I hear the minister telling me about the financial health of the airlines. I understand that, but there is also the financial health of those who are being held hostage by the situation and who have bills to pay.

What is his plan for those people?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Minister Duclos has 15 seconds to respond.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, once again, the financial situation of Canadian households is an extremely important issue. If I had much more time, I could explain to the hon. member the measures we have put in place and will continue to put in place to help families across the country.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: In the United States and in Europe, airlines must reimburse cancelled flights. Why, in Canada, can they not do the same?

• (1420)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, I would like to point out that the assistance that the Government of Canada provides to Canadian families and businesses is among the highest of all developed countries. In an emergency such as the one we are experiencing right now, the Canadian government is doing at least as well as any other country in the world.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Madam Chair, I would like to know why a company that has one year's worth of cash does not have to reimburse its customers for a service it did not provide, when it is required to do so by law.

Just because the company is called Air Canada, does that mean it is entitled to special treatment?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, the hon. member is right again. All companies must follow the laws and regulations. In spite of the difficult circumstances we are experiencing, we expect all companies, be they airlines or others, to follow the laws and regulations of the country.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Madam Chair, I am pleased to hear the minister tell me that he would like companies to follow the laws and regulations of the country.

In Quebec, we have the Civil Code of Quebec and the Consumer Protection Act. They state that, even if the circumstances are exceptional and beyond a company's control, customers must be reimbursed for a service not rendered.

Will the government enforce the laws?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, those two comments are also relevant.

First, any company, whatever it may be, has an obligation to comply with the laws and regulations. Second, people can turn to certain services to ensure that the laws and regulations are adopted and upheld by the companies in question.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have 47 seconds.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Canadian Transportation Agency told the airlines that they were not required to reimburse their customers and that they could simply give them a credit, valid for 24 months. This is contrary to the laws of Quebec.

How does the government feel about a federal institution telling companies not to follow the laws of Quebec?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Yes, upholding the law is the responsibility of both citizens and businesses. We therefore expect all companies, whether or not they are in the air transport sector, to follow the laws and regulations of the country.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): You have 30 seconds left, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Madam Chair, I am discouraged.

We simply have to reimburse the customers. It is not complicated. It's the law. Period.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Mr. Minister, you have four seconds left.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I thank my colleague. I will be delighted to continue the discussion, despite the short time we will have in the House to do so.

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will go to the member for Glengarry—Prescott—Russell.

[Translation]

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to inform you that I'll be sharing my time with the hon. member for Saint-Laurent.

Since this is the first time I'm speaking here, I want to acknowledge the work of the people in the riding of Glengarry—Prescott—Russell who work in the health care field, as well as the businesspeople, our farmers and the people who work in the grocery stores. I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

My question is about what the government is doing to support families with children during these difficult times. As we know, COVID-19 has a significant impact on parents and children. I've spoken to several families in Glengarry—Prescott—Russell. Many of them are facing the challenges that come with working from home, the uncertainty about their jobs and having to care for children who can no longer attend school or day care.

Many parents in my riding have told me that they need our support, which is why I was pleased to see the government present many measures that will support parents and children. As in the case of the Canada emergency student benefit, new investments in Canada summer jobs, the Canada emergency wage subsidy, and the Canada emergency response benefit, I've seen the government step up its efforts to support Canadians.

My question is for the Treasury Board President. Could you let us know what the government is doing currently to support parents and children specifically?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I'd like to thank Mr. Drouin for everything he just said. His words are imbued with empathy and solidarity.

He's right to mention the difficulties that our families and our workers are experiencing. He's also right to mention that the Canada child benefit, which on the 20th of each month, when the payment is made, reduces child poverty in this country by 40%. He's right to mention that just today, May 20, \$300 per child is being paid to 3.5 million families. He's also right to point out that, as of July 20, there will be a new indexation of the Canada child benefit. Once again, families will be able to receive the help they need to care for the children who, of course, are our future.

• (1425)

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): There are 13 seconds left.

Ms. Lambropoulos, you have the floor.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Madam Chair, I'd first like to take a moment to thank everyone who provides essential services, who have worked tirelessly since this crisis began.

[English]

I want to thank all of our health care workers and everyone who works in essential services for all they do during this crisis.

[Translation]

The COVID-19 pandemic is having significant impacts in communities across the country. Canadians are feeling the impact of the pandemic, whether it is on their health or their lifestyle, as we're all in confinement, on their finances or on their jobs.

[English]

Companies of all sizes as well as constituents have reached out to me, as I'm sure they have to all the MPs in the House, in order to let us know about their concerns. This is why we've been able to modify programs in order to help as many Canadians as possible.

[Translation]

The government has implemented several measures to help a majority of Canadians, businesses and community organizations. Several of them are located in the riding of Saint-Laurent. I applaud those efforts. Despite strong measures, including the Canada emergency wage subsidy and the Canada emergency commercial rent assistance, there are still small businesses that are falling through the cracks.

Can the minister explain to the House what our government is doing to help these businesses?

[English]

What measures has our government put in place for those who may require additional help to recover from COVID-19 in order to get back to work as soon as possible?

[Translation]

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages): I thank my colleague, who is the member for Saint-Laurent, a beautiful riding next to the riding of Ahuntsic-Cartierville.

We have provided various forms of support in the context of this pandemic. First, of course, is the Canada emergency response benefit, or CERB, which is \$2,000 a month. My colleague, Minister Duclos, had the opportunity earlier to mention all the measures to individuals.

I am pleased to present all the measures for businesses, be it for the Canada emergency wage subsidy or the \$40,000 emergency loan, which was expanded yesterday with new criteria. There's also the regional relief and recovery fund, which will be administered by Canada's regional development agencies. In Quebec, it will be done through the Réseau des SADC.

This is good news for our businesses, which unfortunately fell through the cracks. Going forward, support will be offered through the regional development agencies. We're talking about \$1 billion. We're here to work with you.

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will go to the honourable member for Simcoe—Grey.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

We are blessed in Simcoe—Grey to usually have a very strong tourist industry. We have many great destinations, such as the Notawasaga Inn Resort; the world's longest freshwater beach, Wasaga Beach; and, of course, the Blue Mountain resort.

Andrew Siegwart, the president of Blue Mountain's village association, has told me he believes that not a single tenant is going to benefit from this rent relief. Many landlords simply cannot afford the 25% contribution they are asked for under the commercial rent assistance program. Their margins just don't allow it.

Tourism operators are calling for direct support for tenants, as the present system still has too many cracks. I have heard the minister say today that she hopes that landlords will do the right thing. Some can't, and I can tell you that tenants need to rely on a lot more than hope.

Will the government commit to providing direct support for our tenants today?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Although the tenant-landlord relationship is ultimately the responsibility of provinces and territories, our government has stepped up to provide support through the tools that we have with the CMHC so that small businesses can get the rent relief they need. We will continue to monitor the program closely and ensure that Canada's small businesses are supported during this challenging time, and as the Prime Minister announced this morning, the portal will be available on May 25.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Madam Chair, I was hoping for something a little more than hope.

My next question is relating to agriculture. Simcoe—Grey dairy farmers like Bonnie den Haan of Sheldon Creek Dairy are being particularly hard hit during this COVID-19 pandemic by the decline in milk consumption and a lack of cull capacity in Canada. The entry into force of CUSMA is yet another challenge for an industry that is still recuperating from past trade deals.

Support was announced in 2019, and the minister continually mentions that the government has provided \$345 million in direct payments to farmers. We appreciate that, but that was one year of an eight-year program.

Can the minister tell us today when dairy farmers can expect to know the plan for the balance, and the compensation, of these future agreements?

• (1430)

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Madam Chair, in Canada, we're fortunate to have a supply management system for the dairy sector. It's truly a privilege, and this allows us to protect family farms and encourage the rural vitality of the various regions.

We're also fortunate to have the Canadian Dairy Commission, a well-structured, competent and experienced organization. Through the increased loan capacity that we gave it last week, it has the opportunity to buy more surplus milk, butter and cheese, and to better manage its stocks.

We announced \$1.75 billion in compensation for the agreements with Europe and the trans-Pacific zone. The first payment was made in December or very early this year. After we manage this health crisis, we'll be able to continue the compensation payments.

[English]

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Madam Chair, I guess they won't be able to put on the milk calendar the exact date they will be getting that payment.

Only 59% of rural homes in Canada have reliable access to high-speed Internet. With schooling, work, government services and even socializing now being done online, the situation has become unbearable. Many of my Simcoe—Grey constituents are being charged hundreds and even thousands of dollars in overage fees since the pandemic began.

The government has committed to connect all Canadians to high-speed Internet by 2030, but this is not fast enough for what's going on in society today.

When will the government commit to a fast-track program to make sure that one of the most essential infrastructure products that we can have now, the Internet, will be available to everyone in my riding?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Thank you for your important question.

I can assure you that our government has a plan. We are on it and we are working to move ahead with even greater urgency because of the challenges that COVID-19 has presented. This is an opportunity for us to bridge the rural-urban divide and help our economy recover faster from the pandemic.

To date, the investments that have been set aside are working to connect 400,000 households in this country, and we will not stop until we work with as many partners as possible to connect all Canadians to high-speed Internet.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: I have just as a quick one. As a former mayor of Essa Township, I understand the complications and challenges facing municipalities from COVID-19. Kathy Jeffery, who is a town councillor on the FCM, wants to ask what the municipalities are going to do. They're not eligible for any of the funding whatsoever. What is this government going to do to help?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: We agree that municipalities are essential. We are working closely with them and we encourage the provinces to do the same.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will go to the honourable member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

Mr. Alex Ruff (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Madam Chair, first I'd like to acknowledge the recent Canadian Armed Forces tragedies, both the Cyclone and the Snowbirds crashes in the recent past. As well, this past Monday was the 10-year anniversary of Colonel Geoff Parker being killed in Kabul, Afghanistan. Further, I just found out in the last couple of days that retired sergeant Kyle Parker, someone else I had the honour to serve with, has passed away. My thanks go to all those who have served and are still serving in the Canadian Armed Forces, along with their families. Your sacrifices will not be forgotten.

Madam Chair, I'd like to recognize the government for making important changes yesterday to the CEBA. This will help many sole-proprietor businesses and farmers in Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound. However, businesses are still required to have a business chequing account versus a personal chequing account. Trelford General construction, in my riding, has been operating for over 25 years but fails to qualify for the loan because it uses a personal chequing account.

When will the government remove the criterion that small businesses must have a business chequing account?

• (1435)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the honourable colleague for recognizing the Canadian Armed Forces. We need to take that time. Thank you so much.

I also want to answer his question by saying that yesterday we did expand CEBA to include dividends and contracts to be part of the CEBA program, and we continue to work on potential solutions to help business owners and entrepreneurs who operate through their personal bank accounts, as the member mentioned, or have yet to file a tax return because they are a newly created business.

We will continue to work with our departments and the members of Parliament to try to find ways to resolve these difficult situations for businesses.

I also want to mention to the House that since the CEBA's launch, over 612,000 businesses have applied for the CEBA program—

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Madam Chair, the question was “when”.

I asked the government a month ago, here in the House, to look into reopening some Service Canada offices in a limited capacity, while respecting provincial health guidelines, in order to serve those Canadians who do not have Internet or phone access. The minister replied that she would take this on as a personal challenge.

When will this occur?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Madam Chair, of course we recognize that when we're dealing with Service Canada issues, it's important to have the proper infrastructure in place. We look forward to working with the different jurisdictions to make sure that we deal with the situation in a timely manner. We know that Canadians want to

have access to the service, and of course the digital infrastructure component of it is critical.

Mr. Alex Ruff: I am more than willing to help out myself. I'm pretty sure that in a month I could get the physical infrastructure necessary into a Service Canada office to make it operational.

Farmers across Canada, including fruit and vegetable growers like Nighthawk Orchards in my riding, are taking on the financial risk related to COVID-19 in order to provide Canadians with healthy, safe and local foods. They have been consistent with their ask to the government: Give us better business risk management programs.

Time is running out. If the government fails to help protect our farmers, some may never recover financially and we will all face food security challenges for years to come. When will the government stop stalling and finally improve AgriStability and other business risk management programs?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Madam Chair, we're working very hard to improve the risk management programs. These are cost-shared programs with the provinces. At a minimum, I meet weekly with my provincial colleagues to find solutions and improve the risk management programs. In a typical year, these programs provide support to the tune of \$1.6 billion and, in a year like this, it could be much more. So, I encourage producers to sign on. Producers also have access to the other programs that are available to businesses.

[*English*]

Mr. Alex Ruff: Can the government please confirm the information within the briefing note, “Information On Carbon Pollution Pricing And Implications For Grain Drying”, dated 20 December, 2019, is indeed classified as secret—yes or no?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Madam Chair, the report is public, but there was some budget-related information that was confidential.

[*English*]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Regina—Wascana.

Mr. Michael Kram (Regina—Wascana, CPC): Madam Chair, this year's Grey Cup is scheduled to be played in the city that I represent, Regina, Saskatchewan.

Unfortunately, the future of the CFL and the Grey Cup championship are in jeopardy due to the current pandemic. The members from Regina—Lewvan, Regina—Qu'Appelle and I would like to know, what plan does the government have to save this important part of Canadian culture while at the same time respecting the interests of taxpayers?

[Translation]

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I thank the hon. member for his question.

[English]

Last week, I had a chance to talk to the commissioner of the CFL, Mark Cohon, and I also had a good conversation with the minister of sport, Steven Guilbeault. Definitely, we know Canadians love the CFL and we really hope that the member's city will be able to host, but the reality right now is that we need to make sure that we continue to follow our public health experts and make sure that we follow the best advice in the circumstances.

Mr. Michael Kram: Madam Chair, according to a recent CBC news report, this government shut down its national emergency stockpile warehouse in Regina, Saskatchewan, last year. In doing so, two million N95 masks and nearly half a million medical gloves were taken to the Regina garbage dump.

I have two questions for the minister: Why was the Regina warehouse shut down, and why was the stockpile of personal protective equipment never replaced?

• (1440)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Madam Chair, the national emergency stockpile is of significant importance for Canadians.

It's important to remember that the stockpile was actually not originally designed to hold personal protective equipment, but rather, antiretrovirals and other medications that are essential to Canadians in a time of crisis. That said, I have committed publicly to reviewing the national emergency stockpile, including how the resources are managed and stored, and we'll have more to say as we go forward.

Mr. Michael Kram: Madam Chair, Canada is a trading nation and the United Kingdom is our fifth-largest trading partner. Yesterday, the United Kingdom released its list of tariffs on Canadian exports that will take effect next year if no free trade agreement is in place. These new tariffs will apply to Canadian wheat, lobster, maple syrup and pretty much everything else that Canadians produce and export.

When will this government begin free trade negotiations with the United Kingdom, or will Canadian exporters be stuck paying these new tariffs?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, Canada is a strong partner of the U.K. and the EU, and we look forward to continuing to strengthen our relationship with each of them. Over the past few years, in preparation for Brexit, our government has actively worked with U.K. ministers and government officials, including having our Prime Minister directly engaged to ensure a solid path forward for our two countries. We remain in touch with our counterparts and we will continue to do so as we analyze the new most-favoured nation tariff regimes schedule announced by the U.K. All Canada-EU agreements will continue to apply to the U.K. during the Brexit transition period.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Michael Kram: Madam Chair, I was pleased to learn recently that Irving Oil's refinery in New Brunswick will finally be able to buy crude oil from western Canada. Unfortunately, they

have to ship the oil by tanker all the way through the Panama Canal.

Doesn't this government find it embarrassing that they have made it so difficult to build pipelines in this country that eastern Canadians are buying western Canadian oil, not through pipelines but through the Panama Canal?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Madam Chair, let me start by saying I am aware of Irving Oil's decision and I think this is a very good step in energy self-sufficiency for our country. It's great to see Canadian energy products being refined and used here in Canada.

When it comes to pipelines, let me just point out that our government has actually bought a pipeline and I'm very pleased to report that this pipeline is being built even as we speak.

Mr. Michael Kram: Madam Chair, I guess I should take this opportunity to inform the minister that the pipeline that her government bought, which still isn't built yet, goes to the west coast. The refinery that wants to buy the oil is on the east coast.

Does the minister not understand the difference between east coast and west coast?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Madam Chair, I am almost tempted not to dignify that juvenile question with an answer. Let me simply say that I believe there are a lot of eager customers for Canadian energy products. When we can get that oil to our Pacific coast, I know that people will be happy to buy it, and it will be great for all Canadians.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I want to remind the Deputy Prime Minister that using specific descriptions of members, even indirectly, is not really acceptable. I just wanted to mention that.

The honourable member for South Surrey—White Rock.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you, Madam Chair.

This government has chosen to partner with a Chinese company backed by the Chinese military to conduct research into COVID-19. The communist regime is widely believed to have hidden data from the world that could have helped prevent the virus's global spread. The Chinese military has also been accused of trying to hack research data by our own intelligence agencies.

Does this government believe that the Chinese government is really the best party to conduct important scientific research with?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Madam Chair, I would like to thank my honourable colleague for her question.

As she full well knows, the health and safety of Canadians is our government's top priority. That is why we're working hard on all fronts to deliver safe and effective treatments and vaccines against COVID-19 for Canadians as quickly as possible. The specific collaboration that the member opposite is talking about really underscores why it's important for us, as Canadians, to explore every promising option for a COVID-19 vaccine. It is important that we do this and pursue this path, because it's in the best interests of Canadians.

• (1445)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Madam Chair, the University of Oxford is widely reported as the front-runner in research development. Is Canada partnering with them?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: The chief science adviser, Madam Chair, is engaging with allies in different jurisdictions and working with partners to learn the best possible options when it comes to vaccine development.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Madam Chair, there are more CERB claimants than unemployed. Public servants are being directed to ignore fraud, which is just unacceptable. A strong warning up front would have prevented many from applying who aren't eligible. Is the government able to explain this discrepancy in the numbers?

Why didn't you forewarn people away who should not have made the claim?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I would advise the member to address the questions to the chair and not to the individual ministers.

[Translation]

The hon. Minister Duclos.

[English]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Madam Chair.

There are three brief things. First, we put this into place because it was an emergency to help Canadians. Second, we have been helping eight million Canadians with a total of 14 million applications. Third, we have signalled from the very start that we have full confidence in the Canada Revenue Agency to track the applicants and to make sure that all of the rigour that is expected by Canadians will apply.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Madam Chair, the government has admitted that our national debt could reach \$1 trillion. Where is the money going to come from to pay for this trillion-dollar debt, and which taxes will the government raise?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, we are concentrating on prioritizing our efforts on Canadians and businesses, and we will continue to do so during the emergency crisis we're in at this time.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: When will the minister relieve our kids and grandchildren from this crippling debt by presenting an economic plan in the House on how we will pay back a trillion-dollar debt?

Hon. Mona Fortier: At this time, it would be impossible to provide a clear economic projection, but we will continue to be open

and transparent about the actions we're taking to support Canadians.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Madam Chair, CECRA has left small businesses in my riding floundering when the landlord refuses to apply and demands that tenants meet all of their rent obligations, even in a government-mandated shutdown of business. Will this government give tenants direct relief?

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, the emergency measures we're putting in place are designed to help people who have commercial rents to pay. We'll continue to support businesses in this crisis.

[English]

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Pacific Customs Brokers in my riding is suffering because this government has given customs payment relief to importers but not to the brokers that most small businesses use. Will this government give payment relief or exemption from liability to these customs brokers, or continue to let them down?

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: Madam Chair, since the crisis began, we've found different ways to support businesses. We'll continue to do so through the programs we've introduced.

[English]

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Many small businesses in my riding are closing down for good.

When will this Prime Minister and cabinet not procrastinate, leaving Canadians in the dark about their immigration figures?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, I'd be delighted to discuss this, but unfortunately we don't have enough time.

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member from Nanaimo—Ladysmith.

Mr. Paul Manly: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The opposition Conservatives have been raising the potential for fraud with the CERB and other relief programs. An elderly mother and her two disabled children alleged to have received the CERB are being held up as an example of fraudsters in a story published in the National Post. Wouldn't a universal payment such as a guaranteed liveable income be a more dignified way of helping Canadians who were struggling with poverty even before COVID-19 increased their cost of living?

• (1450)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, I would like to congratulate the member of Parliament for his wording on poverty, exclusion, anxiety and vulnerability, all of those things that Canadians face every day in the context of this crisis. We are working very hard. We're happy to have his support in order to put in place these emergency measures, and we look forward to further collaborating with him.

Mr. Paul Manly: I would like to ask about a very serious long-running scam involving billions of dollars. Executives of over 450 corporations extracted wealth from the oil and gas resources of this country, paid themselves and their shareholders handsomely, and then declared bankruptcy, leaving behind hundreds of thousands of abandoned oil wells to clean up. Taxpayers are subsidizing this cleanup to the tune of \$1.7 billion.

Does the government know if any of the people involved in this massive dine-and-dash scam are now involved with any companies that are receiving government funding to clean up these orphan wells?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Madam Chair, following the example of my colleague, let me just say that I know the member is very concerned about Canadian working people and understands that today, as we face the coronavirus, we need to be even more concerned about Canadian working people.

The member opposite would agree with members on this side of the House—and I think on the other side of the House—that workers in the oil and gas sector are particularly affected and are facing a double blow. That is why I am extremely proud of the \$1.7 billion our government has committed to cleaning up orphan wells. I think this is a program we can all—

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Mr. Manley.

Mr. Paul Manly: I do believe that the workers need help and deserve to have help. What I would like to see is accountability for the executives. I would like to know whether the government knows if the former executives who left behind these orphan wells and stuck the taxpayers with this massive cleanup bill are involved with companies that are receiving these emergency relief benefits.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Let me just continue my answer from the previous question, which is to say that our government's priority today is to help Canadian workers whom we know are facing a greater challenge than at any time since the Great Depression. We understand that the workers in the oil and gas sector are facing a double whammy. We also understand the importance of cleaning up Canada's environment, and I think the orphan well program is perhaps one of those rare programs that members on all sides of this House can support.

Mr. Paul Manly: Indeed, we did support and advocate for cleaning up orphan oil wells. What I would like to know is whether we're going to have accountability for the people who left those orphan oil wells behind. I would like to know whether they've been named in the Panama papers or the Paradise papers that reveal tax cheats.

It's estimated that \$19 billion of lost revenue each year goes to tax evasion and tax avoidance. Will the government force companies that use these offshore accounts to change their practices and pay their fair taxes in order to receive these emergency benefits?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Let me just say to the member opposite but on this side of the House that our government absolutely agrees that all Canadians and all Canadian companies need to pay their fair share. We have committed unprecedented amounts of money to the CRA to find examples of tax fraud. Having said that, we also understand that we are facing an emergency right now, and

our priority first and foremost is to take care of Canadian workers and not to punish them.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): There are eight seconds left.

Mr. Paul Manly: I agree. I think the polluters should pay, and we need to have a way for them to pay.

As a quick question, will the government be extending relief benefits to people who are living on CPP disability?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will have a very brief answer.

[*Translation*]

The hon. President of the Treasury Board.

[*English*]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Unfortunately, I don't have enough time.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will go to the honourable member for London—Fanshawe.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Human trafficking is a horrible crime that is hurting women, girls and marginalized people. Last September the Liberal government announced a \$75-million commitment for a national strategy against human trafficking. However, organizations that provide long-term support to trafficked and sexually exploited women and girls are being cut. The London Abused Women's Centre is now forced to shut down its programs.

Where is the funding the government promised, and why is it letting these important programs end?

• (1455)

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Madam Chair, I want to thank everybody on the front lines of the work to support survivors of gender-based violence, including human trafficking.

My colleague is absolutely right. We put forward a plan with \$75 million, and \$10 million of that will specifically provide empowerment supports to survivors. To date, over 500 organizations have received emergency COVID funding from our government, in addition to hundreds that had received capacity-building funds.

We're not done yet, Madam Chair, and we will have more to say in the near future.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Madam Chair, the funding was meant to allow organizations to provide support for victims and survivors of human trafficking.

Why aren't they receiving these funds to continue that important work? Has the government abandoned the fight against human trafficking?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: The fight against human trafficking is all of our collective fight, and we are committed to addressing this horrendous crime and putting an end to it.

We have a strategy in place. An old program sunsetted, and we're working on better solutions.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Madam Chair, students with dependants are facing tremendous financial stress, and during this difficult time the government has decided to define a student's dependant as up to 12 years old instead of using the CRA definition of 18 years old.

Why is this government determined to make it harder for Canadians to access the help they need during this pandemic?

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. President of the Treasury Board has time for a short answer.

[*English*]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Madam Chair.

This is a very good question, a very good comment, which signals all the important measures we have put into place to help students, to help children, to help families with children, as we're doing today.

Today 3.5 million families are receiving \$300 per child due to the increase in the Canada child benefit.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Vanessa is a single mother to a son who has a congenital heart defect. Two years ago, Vanessa bravely decided to return to school to get her degree. She has looked for summer work so she could earn enough for her and her son to live off of before the pandemic, but now she has to decide between paying rent and buying groceries.

Vanessa applied to the CESB, only to find out that instead of being eligible for \$2,000 a month with her dependant, she is only eligible for \$1,250 because her son is 13 years old. This won't cover her living expenses.

Will this government change the eligibility for students with dependants from 12 years old to 18 years old?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, the overall objective of our government's mandate in this particular crisis is to help people swiftly and efficiently with measures we have never seen in our country and perhaps we have never imagined, such as the Canada emergency response benefit, the Canada emergency student benefit, the increase in the GST tax credit and today's increase in the Canada child benefit. We know all of these measures are not only deserved but absolutely needed in the context of this important crisis.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Vanessa and her son can't get by, so you're leaving them behind because of a stipulation.

Does the government consider 13-year-old children capable of working to help support parents who are trying to complete their educations?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I remind the member that she is to address the questions to the chair and not to the minister.

[*Translation*]

The hon. President of the Treasury Board.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll say it in French so that it'll be even clearer. It's always better in both languages.

The most important thing here is quickly and effectively helping millions of families with or without children who need our assistance in an emergency situation. We're rolling out several programs that we've announced, and there will always be more to do.

[*English*]

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Madam Chair, even as workplaces and industry start to slowly reopen, Vanessa can't work outside her home for fear of exposing her son to COVID-19. Schools are closed. She cannot use other forms of child care as they may not be safe for him, and there are no available spaces that are affordable for her. She is struggling to make ends meet.

What is this government's plan to help parents like Vanessa, who need to go back to work but cannot leave their children at home alone?

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. Minister Duclos has 25 seconds to answer.

[*English*]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, I'm so grateful for raising the issue of child care. This is an example of the types of measures that were put in place in normal times that have a big impact in unusual times. The \$7.5-billion, 10-year investment that we started to implement in the first mandate is one of those types of measures that are also very important in the context of a particular crisis, and we know they will be important once we emerge from the crisis.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. member for Joliette.

• (1500)

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette, BQ): Madam Chair, what is the government doing to honour the supplementary unemployment benefit agreements it has concluded with businesses?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, earlier, we were talking about youth unemployment. Let me tell you that we've never seen—at least within living memory—such a high unemployment rate in Quebec. The Canada emergency response benefit is very important in Quebec, and I look forward to continuing to talk about it.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Madam Chair, I'll repeat my question, and I'd like the Treasury Board President, if he's answering, to answer the question.

What is the government doing to honour the supplementary unemployment benefit agreements it has concluded with businesses?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, this allows me to continue what I was going to say.

In Quebec alone, according to my calculations, there are about 2 million Quebecers, many of whom wouldn't be eligible for employment insurance benefits, who are receiving the Canada emergency response benefit. Obviously, there will be follow-up to this emergency benefit, and we are looking forward to discussing it with the opposition members.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Madam Chair, I'll give the hon. President of the Treasury Board some details.

As a result of being forced to shut down their operations, many businesses had to refer their employees to employment insurance before the emergency benefit was in place. To support their purchasing power, they entered into supplementary unemployment benefit agreements. Instead of receiving 55% of their wages, through the supplementary unemployment benefit, workers were therefore able to receive about 80% of their wages. However, despite the agreements reached with the businesses, the government didn't contact them and converted employment insurance into emergency benefits. It's radio silence about the supplementary unemployment benefit agreements. The government has forgotten about them.

If there is no response, businesses honour their part of the contract. Left in the dark, they continue to pay the extra benefits to their employees as agreed. Now workers have to pay back their emergency benefits because the supplementary unemployment benefits are over \$1,000 and exclude them from the emergency response benefit. Because businesses often have more than 1,000 employees, that's a lot of people falling through the cracks.

What will the government do?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, I thank the hon. member for his somewhat lengthy question, which will allow me to provide a little more detail.

It's important to differentiate between three periods: the one prior to March 15, the one between March 15 and the end of the Canada emergency response benefit, and the one after the Canada emergency response benefit.

Prior to March 15, there was the employment insurance program, which applies to everyone who applied for employment insurance before March 15.

Between March 15 and a maximum of four months out of a total of eight months, people can receive the Canada emergency response benefit, which significantly increases the number of Quebecers who can receive assistance from the federal government. In fact, about 30% of Quebecers who currently receive the benefit would not receive it if we were in employment insurance mode.

There will be a post-Canada emergency response benefit. We have already announced that the employment insurance program will follow the Canada emergency response benefit, to pay employment insurance benefit to those—

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. member for Joliette.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Madam Chair, I want to stress the seriousness of the situation. Thousands and thousands of workers are currently falling through the cracks because there has been a lack of communication and follow-up between the large businesses that have signed a supplementary unemployment benefit agreement with the government. This is causing a serious problem, and the government must take action.

I'd like to ask the President of the Treasury Board if he would consider authorizing a new interim order that would exclude employment income earned under an authorized agreement for the emergency benefit through the supplementary unemployment benefit plan, at least for the period from March 15 to April 11.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Madam Chair, I'd like to thank the hon. member for stressing the importance of communication. Of course, communication is sometimes more difficult in an emergency situation than in a normal situation.

There are people, organizations, businesses in his riding that need help. We know that they can call on his work, his energy, his expertise. Otherwise, Service Canada agents who work very hard in an exceptional context will be happy to help him and those they serve.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. member has 10 seconds left.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Does the government realize that it's falling behind with regard to the current situation and that it doesn't seem to want to do anything right now?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The minister has 10 seconds.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I agree a little less with the hon. member on that. In fact, saying that the government is doing nothing under the current circumstances is a bit of an exaggeration.

• (1505)

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Barrie—Innisfil.

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll be splitting part of my time with the member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes.

On May 12, the CBSA announced the suspension of service at the Lake Simcoe Regional Airport. This airport has a commercial port of entry designation.

With this decision, there is now no international clearance ability for persons or goods within the central Ontario region, meaning that any international flights requiring customs will not be able to use the airport. Those unable to use the airport include, for example, Honda Canada, the area's largest employer, which just restarted production and needs the airport for parts; DND, which will not be able to use it for Operation Laser, the Canadian military operation related to the pandemic that is stationed and on standby near Canadian Forces Base Borden; local manufacturers supplying PPE during the COVID-19 crisis; international medical repatriation flights; and Hydro One, which maintains the Ontario power grid.

How could such a decision be made, given how important this airport is to this area during this pandemic?

Hon. Bill Blair: I want to thank the member opposite for this question.

The matter, of course, had been brought to me by one of his colleagues earlier. I inquired of the CBSA, and it provided that answer to the Lake Simcoe Regional Airport. Provisions have been made for emergency landings still being managed through the Borden airport and, additionally, for some facilitation of commercial flights.

There are restrictions that have been put in place at this and many other locations due to the lower volumes directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I believe a solution has been put in place for that airport.

Mr. John Brassard: Mr. Minister, there is no landing opportunity at CFB Borden. There is simply no functional runway there.

This is a short-sighted decision by the minister. It's such a concern that County of Simcoe Warden George Cornell contacted all area MPs, saying that the Lake Simcoe Regional Airport has always maintained service due to a variety of reasons during past crises.

Will the minister commit to reinstating services to the LSRA as a commercial point of entry because of its importance in maintaining supply chains for our local and Canadian economy, and for the receipt of PPE?

Hon. Bill Blair: In the response that the CBSA provided, it indicated that CFB Borden arrivals could be facilitated at the Lake Simcoe Regional Airport, as well as other specific commercial traffic.

We will do our best to continue to support the essential movement of goods and services through that airport, but at the same time, general aviation and private aircrafts' comings and goings will be restricted while these restrictions remain in place.

Mr. John Brassard: Last week at PROC, there was a report issued, and it clearly showed that there was a contempt of Parliament. In fact, what the Liberal members and the Bloc members supported was a move to a virtual Parliament. Exploiting the pandemic to implement a permanent virtual Parliament with its reduced ability to hold the government to account is gravely undermining a democracy.

Why would the government support a move to a fully permanent virtual Parliament?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, what we're looking for here is a balance between the opposition's ability to ask questions, which is fundamental to our democracy, and respecting Canada's public health guidelines.

We're currently operating both virtually and in person. Together, we're exploring the possibility of a hybrid method that would allow some MPs to be on site regularly while others would attend virtually.

I'm wondering if my colleague agrees—

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Barrett for about 45 seconds.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm glad that the government House leader mentioned that it's part of our democracy that the opposition be able to ask questions. Part of that is that the government is then obligated to answer them, and if this is the substitute for the House of Commons, the government should be answering our questions. My question for the government earlier was with respect to the mansion that was being built for the Prime Minister while his other mansion was being renovated.

Why can't he stay home? Why was it being covered up? How much is it going to cost?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, once again, this is a round-about way of going back to what was said earlier. I'm going to have to raise my point of order.

It has absolutely nothing to do with the debates we're having right now about the pandemic. I hope my colleague will take seriously the debates that are taking place here and the fact that we're having the equivalent of seven 45-minute question periods every week to answer questions from the opposition.

The Chair: We are continuing with Mr. Berthold.

● (1510)

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, the very problem is that the government is picking and choosing the questions it wants to answer.

The new Auditor General confirmed yesterday that her office would probably not be able to complete its audit of the federal infrastructure plan by the deadline requested by the majority of members of the House.

The government has delivered virtually nothing on its infrastructure plan since 2015, except talk and fancy graphics. It's not just me saying that. In an article by The Canadian Press, the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities was quoted as saying that she was trying to be smarter and more efficient with existing programs.

Will the government pledge here and now to give the Office of the Auditor General the figures it needs?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the member for this opportunity to congratulate the new Auditor General and let her know that she can count on our full support. We know that the work she'll be doing is incredibly important for government and parliamentary institutions alike and will provide Canadians with greater transparency and openness, two fundamental principles that must be upheld in Canada. We look forward to working with her.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, everyone knows history repeats itself.

Unfortunately, during a time of economic growth, the Liberals couldn't fulfill their commitment, and the infrastructure money never made it out of Ottawa.

With the global economy ailing, no one trusts the Liberals to revive the economy now that the going is tough, since they couldn't do it when the going was good.

When will the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities unveil her recovery plan and give the green light so infrastructure projects can gear up in Canada?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, unfortunately, I disagree with the member. The Minister of Infrastructure and Communities is working on how infrastructure projects can help get the economy moving again and put people to work in the short term. In the long term, we will address the challenges that COVID-19 brought to the fore and we will help rebuild Canada.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, the infrastructure minister said that the federal government would contribute up to 80% of the funding for infrastructure projects.

Will that be the case for all infrastructure projects sitting on her desk?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, the minister is engaged in extensive consultations with the provinces and municipalities, as well as experts at home and abroad.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, starting when will projects be eligible for federal funding?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, as everyone knows, the economy has not been hit this hard since the 1930s—

The Chair: Mr. Berthold, you may go ahead.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, will all the proposals submitted to Ottawa so far also be funded at 80%? After all, they have been the victims of the Liberal government's delay in approving projects for far too long.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, when Canada builds, Canada grows.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, in response to a question from the member for Lévis—Lotbinière, the minister said that all regions in Canada would be connected to high-speed Internet.

I got a message from Valérie Beaudoin, a resident of Kinnear's Mills. She wanted to know what the government was doing for municipalities with poor Internet service. She pointed out that Kinnear's Mills is a small municipality and that she has five teenagers and two children in elementary school all studying at home. She said online services were unreliable or simply didn't work at all.

When will the last household finally be connected to the Internet?

[*English*]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, we have put forward investments, along with a carefully thought-out plan developed in partnership with municipalities, to connect Canadians to the high-speed Internet that they so deserve and that we're all going to need to recover from COVID-19. We're going to do so as soon as possible.

Through you, Mr. Chair, let me put it out to all partners: We're willing to work with every willing partner to get this done.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, as soon as possible is too late for students who have to do their schooling online.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities tweeted this out:

Canada's cities and communities are facing a financial crisis and are out of acceptable options. This is no time to cut back frontline services. And shelving infrastructure projects threatens the economic recovery everyone's counting on.

Is the Prime Minister, who knows full well municipalities can't run deficits, pulling a fast one on taxpayers? They are the ones who will be on the hook when municipalities can't pay all of their bills at the end of the year.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the member for his question.

I completely agree that municipalities are still vital, especially now as we get Canada's economy going again. They are also vital when it comes to public transit.

I think every member of the House understands the conditions municipalities have to work within, and all of us should understand that municipalities are under provincial jurisdiction. The federal government is willing to work with municipalities and provinces.

● (1515)

[*English*]

The Chair: Pursuant to an order made April 20, the committee shall now consider a motion that the committee take note of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic for not more than two hours and 10 minutes. Each recognized party shall be allotted 30 minutes for debate, which may be shared among members of the party, and members who do not belong to a recognized party shall be allotted a total of 10 minutes for debate.

The honourable Minister of Middle Class Prosperity and Associate Minister of Finance.

[*Translation*]

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

I'll be sharing my time with the Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages and the Minister of Indigenous Services.

As we are all well aware, the COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis of historic proportions.

[*English*]

Public health and safety, along with safeguarding the economy and protecting jobs for Canadian workers, remain this government's top priorities. We are listening to Canadians and working tirelessly to find solutions that will keep them safe and slow the spread of COVID-19.

Since this crisis began, I have participated in digital town halls across the country to hear the concerns and ideas of Canadians and to help answer their questions. Our government has been listening and taking action to support them. Over the past two and a half months, the government has taken strong actions through the economic response plan to help mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Canadians.

Our government has committed more than \$150 billion in widespread and direct support. We have one of the most comprehensive plans in the G7. I would like to highlight for Canadians some of the key actions that the government has made recently to make the economic response plan more far-reaching and effective so that it can more specifically meet the needs of Canadian workers and businesses.

The Canada emergency wage subsidy helps businesses keep employees on the payroll, and it encourages employers to rehire workers previously laid off. It also better positions businesses to bounce back following the crisis. It provides a 75% wage subsidy, up to a \$847 per week, for employers of all sizes and across all sectors who suffered a major drop in gross revenues. To date, this program has supported over two million Canadian workers, and businesses continue to sign up every day.

Just last week, the Prime Minister announced that our government will extend the Canada emergency wage subsidy by an additional 12 weeks to August 29, 2020. Extending the program will give workers greater confidence that they will continue to get the support that they need during these difficult times.

[Translation]

Here are some employers who are now eligible: indigenous government-owned corporations that carry on businesses as well as partnerships whose members are indigenous governments and eligible employers; registered journalism organizations; and private schools and colleges including institutions that offer specialized services such as arts schools, driving schools, language schools and flight schools.

• (1520)

[English]

As well, the Canada emergency response benefit remains a key plank of our government's effort to directly support Canadians who have lost their jobs, are sick, are quarantined or are taking care of someone who is sick with COVID-19.

Just as important, it also includes working parents who must stay home without pay to care for children who are sick or at home because of school and day care closures. This benefit has supported approximately eight million Canadians, because in these extraordinary times no Canadian should have to worry about paying their bills or rent, or about putting food on the table.

Additionally, workers who are still employed but are not receiving income because of disruptions to their work situation related to COVID-19 would also qualify for the CERB. The CERB is available to Canadian workers affected by the current situation, whether or not they're eligible for employment insurance.

[Translation]

The latest figures reveal that nearly 8 million Canadians have applied for the Canada emergency response benefit, or CERB, with approximately \$35.9 billion in payments going to Canadians who need it most.

All over the country, parents are wondering whether they can still afford to feed their families, as they try to educate and raise their children in creative ways. Since its launch in 2016, the Canada child benefit, or CCB, has bolstered family incomes and allowed us to assist those who need it most. The CCB is a tax-free monthly payment made to eligible families to help with the cost of raising children under 18 years of age. Under the CCB, low- and middle-income families are receiving higher payments than they did under the previous child benefit system.

[English]

As part of its COVID economic response plan, our government took decisive action to ensure that families receive an additional \$300 per child through the CCB in May to help them deal with the added pressure of COVID-19. Eligible families are automatically receiving this one-time increase as part of their scheduled CCB payment this week. Those who already receive the CCB do not need to reapply for this one-time income. This measure will deliver almost \$2 billion in extra support across the country. It will help families with the high costs of taking care of their kids during this challenging period.

Many of our seniors are also facing difficulties. They built this country, and now they need our help. No one, especially the elderly, should have to choose between putting food on the table, paying for prescriptions or saving money for expenses that are coming.

[Translation]

Since the pandemic began, the Government of Canada has taken steps to help seniors. More than 4 million seniors received a one-time payment through the GST credit in April, totalling \$1.3 billion. That means that, on average, single seniors received an additional \$375 and senior couples received an additional \$510.

The government also reduced the required minimum withdrawals from registered retirement income funds, or RRIFs, by 25% for 2020.

Last week, we took further steps to give Canadian seniors greater financial security during this time of crisis. We announced a one-time tax-free payment of \$300 for seniors eligible for old age security, with an additional \$200 for seniors eligible for the guaranteed income supplement. This measure will deliver a total of \$500 to individuals who are eligible, helping them to cover increased costs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

• (1525)

[English]

We're also expanding the new horizons for seniors program with an additional investment of \$20 million to support organizations that offer community-based projects that reduce isolation, improve the quality of life of seniors and help them maintain a social support network.

We are also extending the GIS and allowance payments if seniors' 2019 income information has not been assessed. This will ensure that the most vulnerable seniors continue to receive their benefits when they need them the most.

The pandemic has placed particular demands on low-income workers in certain sectors, including those on the front line in hospitals and nursing homes, those ensuring the integrity of the food supply or those providing essential retail services to Canadians.

[Translation]

The government intends to provide up to \$3 billion to support low-income essential workers across the country. Each province or territory will determine which workers will be eligible for the support.

[English]

Together, we will get through this. When this crisis is behind us, we will be in a better position to rebound together and to keep building a stronger country where everyone can succeed.

[Translation]

The Chair: The Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages has the floor.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Chair, Canadians are living with the impact of the COVID-19 crisis every single day. It has upended the everyday lives of Canadians from coast to coast to coast. Each of us has witnessed the impact in our own corner of the country. It's a public health crisis, but it's also an economic crisis.

[English]

Our cities, including Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, but also our regions from Bathurst to Tofino, including the great north, are affected by what's going on.

[Translation]

The government has three priorities. The first is to protect Canadians' health and safety, with the ever-constant goal of flattening the curve involving the public health risk. The second is to expand the social safety net. That will allow us to flatten another curve, the curve of inequality.

[English]

We decided to extend massively the social safety net, and we decided to adopt a people first approach. We created the CERB, which is a \$2,000 amount per month. We also increased the Canada child benefit. We came up with some new GST payments to people all across the country, and later on, we came up with increased support for students and seniors.

[Translation]

The third and final priority is the economic response. That means flattening the curve of economic risk.

As economic development minister, supported by six incredible parliamentary secretaries, I can tell you that we've covered a lot of ground, in the virtual sense, of course. We've taken part in meetings on Zoom and Webex, as well as webinars with entrepreneurs and chambers of commerce representatives.

We've talked to thousands of entrepreneurs around the country, in cities, regions and even the wonderful part of the country so dear to you, Mr. Chair, northern Ontario. We've heard people's anxieties, and we understand their stress. Before I got involved in politics, I was an entrepreneur, so I understand the stress and worries of entrepreneurs struggling to cope in this unprecedented crisis. In response to the high level of anxiety around the country, we took action and put forward solutions.

Let's look at how our government has responded. I think that, in the beginning, we thought the economic impact was essentially a shift in need. We thought business revenues might drop for a month or two before going back up. That's why we put greater emphasis on liquidity supports. We engaged the banking system, the Bank of Canada and Export Development Canada. Once my fellow members and I had the opportunity to talk to people on the ground and hear from entrepreneurs, we knew we had to do even more and address costs. We had to take more of a subsidy-based approach.

• (1530)

[English]

As we were taking stock of what was going on, what entrepreneurs and their different chambers of commerce were telling us, we decided to look much more into the costs of businesses and their burn rate. That's why we decided to go ahead with a first-ever wage subsidy that increased from 10% at the beginning of the crisis to 75% now. We came up also with the CEBA loan, a \$40,000 loan that includes a \$10,000 forgivable subsidy. Also, as fixed costs were still an issue, we came up with rent relief.

Although we came up with these important and never-before measures, businesses were still falling through the cracks. That's why it became clear that we had to go forward with a new fund. This is the regional relief fund. This fund is administered through ACOA in Atlantic Canada, DEC in Quebec, FedDev and FedNor in Ontario, Western Economic Diversification in western Canada and CanNor in the three territories.

Nearly \$1 billion will be awarded through our different regional development agencies to make sure that businesses that do not have access to the wage subsidy or the CEBA loan, the \$40,000 loan, will finally have access to new measures.

Our regional development agencies are well tooled to know what is important in northern Ontario, in Atlantic Canada and in Quebec. They know that businesses have been hard hit in western Canada, and they're well tuned to be the convenor of many other federal government programs and also those of the government of proximity that is the closest to the ground, while we're still the federal government, sometimes hundreds or thousands of kilometres away from people and businesses.

[*Translation*]

That's why we established a significant \$1 billion fund, the regional relief and recovery fund, or RRRF.

The RRRF is a way to make sure that no entrepreneurs or employees fall through the cracks. I said earlier that we've extended the social safety net. We wanted to tighten up the system so that, ultimately, we would have an even stronger social safety net. The good news yesterday was that we expanded the \$40,000 loan. There are now new criteria that enable sole proprietors or people who pay themselves dividends to access funding.

However, there are still businesses and entrepreneurs that don't qualify for the loan and that can now apply under the regional relief and recovery fund. The fund will be administered by the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, or ACOA, in Atlantic Canada; Canada Economic Development, or CED, in Quebec; the federal economic development initiative for northern Ontario, or FedNor, and the federal economic development initiative for southern Ontario, or FedDev Ontario; Western Economic Diversification Canada, or WD, in western Canada; and the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, or CanNor, in the three territories.

The fund consists of \$675 million to support the economic development agencies and \$287 million to support the community futures development corporations, or CFDCs, and our various community development organizations across the country. The goal of the program is to provide access to funding, including loans or subsidies, to fill the gaps or to support our strategic businesses.

We know that industries have been hit hard, particularly seasonal industries, such as tourism. As the minister who's also responsible for tourism, I can tell you that the sector needs help right now. That's why we're here for the sector and why we've set up this program.

[*English*]

Some industries have been more impacted than others. We know that, for example, seasonal industries are more impacted, and we know also that the tourism sector has been hard hit. Many of our colleagues in the House have mentioned this issue. What we're saying to tourism operators and tourism leaders is, come and see your regional development agency. Let's sit down, let's have a conversation, and let's find solutions.

All these measures are being taken for people. We are doing that for people to make sure that businesses can survive this economic

crisis, that we can keep jobs and that people receive paycheques through their employers. What we're saying to Canadians right now is that we're working for you, with you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1535)

The Chair: We'll now go to the Minister of Indigenous Services.

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Kwe. Tansi. Ulaakut. Good afternoon.

As we are learning from past experiences in responding to pandemics in Canada, and specifically in first nations, Inuit and Métis communities during H1N1, we need to recognize and understand from that experience that these communities have a higher risk of being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. That remains the case.

The first nations and Inuit health branch continues to provide effective, sustainable and culturally appropriate health programs and services that contribute to the reduction of gaps in health status between first nations and Inuit and other Canadians. I would like to remind members of the House and all Canadians that improving the health of indigenous peoples is a responsibility shared by federal, provincial and territorial, and indigenous partners. Our common goal continues to be to work together in partnership to ensure that indigenous communities receive the care they need. By working together, we can save lives.

As of May 19, we've seen 198 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in first nation communities on reserve and 16 cases in Nunavik. It is important to note for the House that of those mentioned cases, 148 first nation cases have recovered, and the entirety of the Inuit cases in Nunavik have recovered. This is due to incredible first nations and Inuit leadership in stopping the curve, aggressive screening and testing when cases manifest themselves in communities, and the amazing work in tracing contacts as quickly as possible when a case arises in a community. It is thanks to that aggressive action and the passage of time that these cases have recovered.

In addition to the direct funding of approximately \$300 million that we've provided to indigenous communities and in addition to business support in excess of \$300 million, to date more than \$107.8 million in funding has been allocated by my department specifically toward the health response to COVID-19 to ensure the procurement of supplies and nursing services in communities, as well as preparedness measures led by the communities themselves, the leadership of which has been exemplary.

We continue to monitor closely the situation in northwestern Saskatchewan in particular, and to support communities in response to the outbreak, we've provided \$2.3 million in funding that has gone towards the northwest Saskatchewan pandemic response plan. This pandemic plan is a collective effort of first nations, Métis, municipal, provincial and federal partners. Meadow Lake Tribal Council and Métis Nation Saskatchewan in particular have undertaken an exemplary collaboration in leading the response to this significant and concerning outbreak.

Indigenous Services Canada also continues to work with the northwest communities incident command centre in the area, including provincial health authorities, first nations and Métis communities to support their efforts through increased access to testing, enhanced surveillance, strong contact tracing, and infection prevention and control measures.

We are all focused on the health response that will save lives. I want to reassure first nations leadership that we are committed to supporting first nation communities in activating their pandemic plans and providing the support and collaboration with provinces that best respond to each community's needs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Translation]

Urban and off-reserve first nations, Inuit and Métis communities face unique issues when it comes to preventing and fighting the spread of this virus. Since the start of the pandemic, urban and off-reserve indigenous organizations and local community organizations have been working around the clock to provide direct services to indigenous peoples.

We acknowledge that COVID-19 has placed additional pressure on the activities of these organizations and has increased their overall spending. In response to these needs, we've taken immediate steps to support these organizations through the indigenous community support fund. A total of \$15 million has been allocated to regional, urban and off-reserve indigenous organizations. These organizations can also receive funding from other federal initiatives under Canada's economic response plan, such as Employment and Social Development Canada's reaching home initiative, and the additional funding allocated to shelters for women who are fleeing violence and to sexual assault centres.

● (1540)

Additional funding for food banks has also been made available to Canadians, including indigenous peoples and northern communities, to meet their urgent food needs. In addition to federal funding, the provinces and territories along with individuals, through charitable donations, play a role in supporting these organizations.

However, we acknowledge that more support is needed. We're actively working with communities to identify the support that they need. We're working with government partners to explore other ways to further assist urban and off-reserve indigenous organizations.

[English]

As part of our COVID-19 economic response plan, and as mentioned by Minister Monsef earlier today, Indigenous Services

Canada is currently distributing \$10 million to its existing network of 46 emergency shelters on first nations reserves and in the Yukon to support indigenous women and children fleeing violence. In response to the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, the Government of Canada committed to working with territories, provinces, and indigenous governments and partners to develop a national action plan that will address violence against women, girls and LGBT and two-spirit people.

To that end, we are supporting national indigenous organizations in reaching out to their members to identify their priorities and best practices, and further understand how they want to be involved in the co-development and implementation work that lies ahead. That's why last week my colleague Minister Bennett attended the Yukon engagement session on violence against indigenous women and girls, co-chaired by Yukon territorial minister, Jeanie Dendys, and women and gender equality minister, Maryam Monsef. The engagement session was a great opportunity to allow Yukon to share wise and promising practices, initiatives, priorities, challenges and views regarding the systemic and disproportionate violence experienced by women and girls and LGBT and two-spirit people, with jurisdictions and other stakeholders from across the country.

In addition, we've recently concluded a proposal-based process to distribute \$15 million to organizations that provide critical services to first nations off reserve and indigenous peoples living in urban centres. This funding is part of the government's indigenous community support fund. To date, over 94 proposals have been supported through the urban and off-reserve stream of the indigenous community support fund. This includes support for friendship centres as they continue their important work to serve urban indigenous communities in the face of this pandemic.

Supporting indigenous youth is another key area of our focus. Among our recent measures, we've included in the nearly \$9 billion for post-secondary students and recent graduates, a one-time increase of \$75.2 million in 2020-21. This is dedicated to providing support to first nations, Inuit and Métis Nation students impacted by COVID-19 so that they can continue, maintain and pursue their academic studies. To be clear, this funding is in addition to the existing distinctions-based support for first nations, Inuit and Métis Nation students pursuing post-secondary education and the Canada emergency student benefit funding, which is available to all Canadian students.

We are also working with indigenous partners, including youth organizations, to support and promote indigenous resources for youth. For example, We Matter is an indigenous-led youth organization focused on life promotion and messages of hope and resilience. They have developed important tool kits that are available for youth, teachers and support workers to help youth and those who support youth.

In closing, let me reiterate that we are committed to responding to and supporting the evolving needs of first nations, Inuit and Métis communities and individuals as we transition together through the various stages of this pandemic.

Meegwetch. Nakurmiik. Marsi. Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. It is an honour to once again stand in this House.

I have no doubt that every member of the House would say that they believe in democracy. Monday will be a chance to prove it, prove that the extraordinary impacts we are facing as a society do not hamper democratic responsible government.

Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine faced impossible odds when trying to structure a working government prior to the bringing together of the British North American colonies. They were faced with a choice about democracy. They chose to respect the people and the then-colonial legislature and to do what was right, a decision that helped build the foundation for what became Canada, the nation we know and love today.

We need to bring Parliament back. Our democracy and our rights depend on it. Responsible government depends on it.

Parliament is the keystone of Canadian democracy and should be allowed to function in its full authority. It is the only way that all corners of this great nation can be represented, where there is a free and unfettered exchange of ideas. That does not mean that we can't respect public health guidelines, as some have suggested.

We can utilize technology to ensure that those who can't be here in person can still ensure that their regions are heard. We can ensure that only a safe number of MPs are physically present in the House at a given time. We can plan around cafeterias being closed, and we can make do with fewer staff.

Legislatures across Canada and many parliaments around the world have figured out a way to make it work. We owe it to our constituents. In fact, we owe it to Canadians, and we owe it to every person who has fought for our freedom throughout our history to make sure that our democracy functions.

I've heard from hundreds and hundreds of constituents who have expressed fear, a fear that the Liberals are using this pandemic to exert a level of authoritarian rule over this country that is both unprecedented and dangerous. These are strong words. However, the evidence keeps piling up, from the executive overreach within the government relating to the gun grab, to the haze of misinformation and lack of accountability on all fronts. The first bill they proposed

would have given them unlimited taxation and spending power for a year and a half, and they continue to refuse to provide clarity on the budget or an economic update, even when we are to see our national debt surpass a trillion dollars and government expenditures half a trillion dollars.

The Prime Minister seems to like the tightly controlled atmosphere of his cottage appearances. He gets a few questions for about half an hour a day, promising billions of dollars with few details. It seems to be carefully choreographed, and this was confirmed when we saw that it was none other than the state broadcaster that was asking the lion's share of the questions. It's also limited to the Ottawa press corps, representing a narrow band of perspectives in this country. The "cottage chronicles", as they are referred to by some of my constituents, do not replace the fundamental role that Parliament needs to play in Canada.

Where does that leave us? I exhort every member of the House, every member who has a seat in this chamber, whether they be members of the opposition or members of the government, to stand up for what's right, to stand up for their constituents, to stand up for our democracy and to call on Monday for a modified return of Parliament in its full authority.

We'll find out on Monday how all members of the House feel about this issue. We need to remember that Parliament, not a Prime Minister who flirts with this authoritarianism, gets to determine what happens. This speaks to a principle that sets the pretext for what we do here, and that is parliamentary supremacy, not press conferences.

With the support and feedback of my constituents, I join with my Conservative colleagues to make it clear that Parliament needs to be brought back.

I conclude with this: We need to show the world that a pandemic has not diminished Canadian democracy. In the words of former prime minister John Diefenbaker, "parliament is more than procedure—it is the custodian of the nation's freedom."

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I would like to thank the people of Saskatoon West. It is certainly my honour to do what I was elected to do, which is to work for them and support them during this pandemic. Many of them have had a difficult time dealing with COVID-19. There have been uncertainties, hardships and difficulties for students trying to graduate and for newcomers waiting for permanent resident status or citizenship, and for those who have lost loved ones, whether from COVID-19 or other things. It's been a very difficult time to be visiting in hospitals, and dealing with mourning has certainly been very hard for people.

Yet the people of Saskatoon West have persevered. They have been delivering food, encouraging others and just behaving very well, so I want to give a big shout-out to the people in my riding in Saskatoon West. You've gone above and beyond and have made us all look very good.

It is great to be here in the House today holding the government to account. Democracy doesn't function over Zoom. It needs in-person meetings. John Diefenbaker said that "parliament is more than procedure—it is the custodian of the nation's freedom." The elected legislature is the beating heart of our government. Without it democracy breaks down. It's so much more than questions and answers.

Holding the government accountable produces concrete improvements, and during COVID-19, in very few sessions, the opposition has forced the government to enhance wage subsidies, offer students supports, reduce penalties for part-time workers, prevent new workers from losing benefits, authorize credit unions to deliver loans and connect employers with potential employees. These improvements came from opposition MPs questioning the government, but there's much more to do.

The Liberal government is still letting Canadians down. As an example from my riding, Percy H. Davis Ltd. is a customs broker with four offices in Saskatchewan, including an office in my riding. The government has deferred GST and customs duties until June 30 to reduce costs and improve the cash flow of importing companies. However, the program has created an unintended consequence, namely, that the importer can defer the payment of GST and duties but the customs broker has to assume the liabilities for those duties. If a business happens to go bankrupt, it's the customs broker who still has to pay these fees. As a result, they're being forced to collect the GST and duty up front, which completely negates the whole purpose of the program. Therefore, I'm calling on the government to provide a waiver or suspension of customs broker liability for duties and taxes owed during the deferral period.

My office has received hundreds of emails, letters and phone calls on many other things, including CERB, wage subsidies, business loans and travel issues, and we've been helping constituents. These issues are important but they're short-term issues.

Another critical purpose of a properly functioning democracy is developing good medium-term and long-term policies. For example, there's been talk of restarting our economy with a focus on green technology. It is wise to use this opportunity to re-examine what we are doing and why. We have to make tough choices and part of that is learning from the mistakes of others. For example, the Liberal government in Ontario tried to implement green power

generation and ended up creating the most expensive electricity in Canada.

We definitely have to treat our planet well and minimize pollution. We have to improve technology to minimize carbon output, but we have to balance that with maintaining our resource base. We have to recognize that much of Canada's wealth comes from exporting resources. We can't destroy our economy in the process.

Another example is the oil industry, which is very much alive. Despite the slowdown from COVID-19, energy demand will continue to rise over time. Renewables will increase, but they can't keep up with demand. Fossil fuels will be required for many years to come. This is especially true in the third world. Fossil fuels are lifting people out of poverty. You can't say to somebody who has never had lights that they can't have electricity, or you can't force someone to continue cooking with smoke-filled fire that causes lung and breathing problems. We can't eliminate the demand for energy.

We must create technology to produce cleaner energy in all forms, including fossil fuels. Canada can demonstrate best practices to the world. Our oil and gas industry is already viewed as the best in the world. We have the best human rights policies and the best wages. We have environmental practices that are the best in the world. Our safety record is second-to-none, and our companies are constantly innovating, creating new and cleaner processes and technologies to extract our resources. The oil industry will be very much alive for many years to come and Canada must lead the way in producing the best oil for the world.

There are more examples I can give, but I want to turn to my final point. What is the long-term economic impact of this COVID-19 pandemic? Here again it is absolutely critical that we have a functioning Parliament. When we ask the government for an economic update, the Liberal government lets Canadians down by not answering.

• (1550)

The Liberals have abdicated their responsibility to provide financial information and instead are relying on the PBO. It's not the PBO's job to produce economic updates and budgets. They're supposed to be a means of sober second thought. It is the finance minister's job to assess the cost of programs and predict revenues. This arithmetic produces a budget. This is hard work, but a competent finance minister can figure it out.

What is our deficit going to be this year? We don't know. Apparently, we're going to have a trillion-dollar debt when this year is over, but the government lets us down by staying silent. A functioning Parliament can continue to ask questions and keep the government accountable.

What are the longer-term implications? Every amount of money we are spending now is being put on our credit card. At some point, that credit card maxes out, and then what? If we think back to World War II, we had very high short-term borrowing, followed by 20 years of booming growth. The debt was brought under control by a roaring economy. Our economy has been plodding along at roughly 2% growth for the last 20 years. Growth is not going to save us this time.

In the mid-1990s, finance minister Paul Martin faced a major problem. Canada's debt had gotten too large as a percentage of the GDP. It was about 68%. Interest costs were dragging the government down. He had no choice but to cut program spending and raise taxes. The debt was brought under control by austerity.

What will happen this time? The Liberals proudly campaigned on slowly decreasing our debt-to-GDP ratio. In one year, it's going to go from 33% to 50%, and possibly higher. If deficit spending continues for several more years, that ratio could hit 60% or more. What magic debt-to-GDP number will plunge Canada into crisis? The government must answer these questions.

We have to have a functioning Parliament in order to continue pressing the government and holding it to account. The future of our country depends on it.

Thank you.

• (1555)

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is the most sacred obligation of a government to protect its people, especially from threats they cannot see. Citizens must be able to trust their government to act responsibly and to act in the public interest in preparing to respond to long-term threats, to be ready with a plan so that we could pull that plan out if we need it.

However, if governments fail to plan for moments of crisis, when they ignore potential threats and bet that good times will last forever, then they violate the most sacred obligation and they break trust with the people they govern. When that trust is broken, public trust in our governing institutions is undermined. This COVID-19 pandemic, striking at this time and in this way, was an unknown, but it unfolded in a way that we should have been planning for, that we had every reason to be prepared for.

In 2003, in the immediate aftermath of the SARS outbreak, the Government of Canada created the Public Health Agency specifically to ensure that we were ready to respond in case of situations like this. SARS and COVID-19 are both part of the same family of viruses. They are both coronaviruses. We created a specific agency of government in response to the last coronavirus outbreak in order to prepare us for the next coronavirus outbreak, to build a plan and to amass resources to fight something like SARS—that is, another coronavirus.

However, in in the last four years under the Liberal government, a massive stockpile was destroyed and not replaced. The Public Health Agency spent money on climate change programs instead of on preparation. We sent vital supplies to China at a time when we

were almost certain to face shortages here. It quickly becomes clear that there was no plan.

In the months leading up to the outbreak, the Minister of Health repeatedly told Canadians that the risk was low. She attacked those who said otherwise, accusing them of spreading misinformation and fear. She said in the House on February 4, with regard to how Canadians can be assured that we're getting the right information, that "One way might be if the opposition does not sensationalize the risk to Canadians".

Instead of attacking the opposition for raising legitimate questions during the early months of this year, the health minister should have been busy preparing. She should have been preparing to roll out a plan that her government had already worked out long in advance. Being prepared to protect our country in the event of a crisis is a sacred obligation of government, and in spite of the lesson of 2003, the government had no plan for the next coronavirus pandemic. When it comes to this sacred obligation to keep Canadians safe, they let us down.

What would a plan have included? What would it have achieved and what could it still achieve even at this relatively late stage?

The data from the countries around the world that have been most successfully fighting COVID-19 identify five key elements of an effective strategy, elements that would have kept us safe while limiting economic devastation. These elements are border measures, masking, testing, tracing and distancing. We can learn from remarkable success stories like Taiwan, South Korea, New Zealand and the Czech Republic, who effectively implemented some or all of these elements.

By border measures, I mean that ideally through limiting flights and through screening at the border, we could have kept COVID-19 out or at least bought ourselves some extra time to put systems in place. The health minister declared early on that border measures would not be effective. The government did eventually close the border, but it was too late, and even after we were told that screening was in place, massive gaps persisted.

Masks provide a physical barrier for the transmission of droplets that can carry COVID-19. There has been plenty of good science available for a long time to suggest that encouraging people to wear masks would limit the spread of this disease. Bizarrely, public health authorities in the U.S. and Canada were critical of mask wearing, even suggesting that it could be counterproductive. This bad advice, thankfully now reversed, represents a scandal of epic proportions. Why, without a shred of evidence, were supposed authorities saying that people shouldn't use a barrier to block droplet transmission? It is as if they imagined the droplets that carry COVID-19 have some mystical, spiritual properties that make them impervious to physical barriers. A droplet is a physical thing, obviously impacted by the presence of a physical barrier, which the officially designated authorities now acknowledge.

The science on masks, though, never changed. Nobody did a new study that immediately and dramatically reversed some previous conclusion. In reality, there was a shortage of masks, which led officials to present misleading information about their usefulness. Even with the shortage, people should have been advised much earlier to deploy homemade cloth masks, which do provide some level of protection, and many experts knew this all along. This government presented misinformation on the mask issue when lives hung in the balance.

On testing and tracing, effective systems of testing and tracing would mean that people were regularly and rapidly being tested for COVID-19, that new testing technologies were coming on-stream quickly and that we were using cutting-edge technology to trace the possible path of the virus every time we found a new case.

Tracing can be done in a way that respects civil liberties as long as there is appropriate independence from government and sufficient oversight. I am sympathetic to those who have concerns about this, but a tracing mechanism with appropriate safeguards is a much lesser infringement on personal liberties than an indefinite requirement that we all stay home.

- (1600)

Finally, there is distancing, something that we are all doing, but distancing alone isn't going to solve this because we cannot distance in the matter that we are at present for very much longer. People are frustrated with the seemingly never-ending quarantine of healthy people, not least because they increasingly have a hard time trusting the government when it comes to information. They are frustrated by a government that was wrong about preparation, wrong about risk levels, wrong about hoarders, wrong about masks, behind on testing and still has not put in place a national framework for tracing.

Now we're approaching the end of May. Where is the plan? Where is the public health plan for adaptation and management of this crisis post-quarantine?

Much could be said about this government's spending measures, but all of those things are ultimately downstream from fundamental questions about how the government is and is not managing the public health issue such that we will be able to re-energize our economy before we are in an acute debt crisis. Effectively targeted bridging measures are the right policies for a short period of time, but no community of people can enjoy prosperity for long without

most of them working. As a result of this crisis and measures already committed to, generations to come will have to live with higher taxes, lower social spending or both. That too is why we need a real plan to fight COVID-19 as quickly as possible.

The government will no doubt respond to some of these criticisms by saying that they were following public health advice. Governments must always listen to a broad range of experts, including both those within the federal public service and those outside of it. Listening to the experts means experts in the plural. It does not mean turning one qualified expert into some kind of infallible authority. It does not mean ignoring the experience of public health officials in other countries who are pursuing a different set of policies and are having more success.

From our leaders we also expect precautionary decision-making. If some experts think border closures will work and some experts think border closures will not work, it is probably safer in the face of an impending pandemic to close the border. Experts can give advice on the likely outcome based on their models, but it is politicians who decide the degree to which we should apply precautionary thinking in responding to that advice.

What do we do now?

It's too late for some things. It's not too late for others. A couple of months ago, I co-authored a piece for The Epoch Times on this issue, in which I said the following:

Our current approach to fighting this pandemic emphasizes general isolation. With a limited supply of masks and limited testing, this is the only way.

In an ideal response, though, people could still leave their homes, but everyone would have access to and be encouraged to wear protective masks in most situations when out and about. Certainly, everyone would continue to be encouraged to regularly wash their hands. Anyone who thought they might be exposed to the virus would get tested immediately and get the results immediately. This way, those who had the virus would know right away and could stay away from others. In the event of errors in awareness or testing...masks, gloves, and hand-washing would still greatly limit transmission. When a case is discovered, those who had been in contact with or in the same area as that person could be immediately notified and immediately tested.

If we had these measures and practices in place, there would be much less of a need for people to stay in their homes. The virus could be tracked and contained even while life continued.

This piece was published on March 31.

This government has a sacred obligation to act to keep Canadians safe, and the government let us down. Public health and our economy have suffered as a result. Now we need to see the plan for adaptation and for reboot. Canadians are innovative. They are ready for a challenge, and I remain optimistic about the future of this country in spite of the challenges. We have overcome bigger things before, but real political leadership is badly needed now more than ever.

Thank you.

• (1605)

The Chair: Before we go on to the next speaker, I'd like to remind the honourable members that we do have interpreters on site, and they have to keep up with what we're saying. I know we get excited and we tend to speak very quickly—I do it myself—but I want to remind everyone out of respect for the interpreters to speak at a more reasonable pace—not slowly, just at a regular pace.

Ms. Rood, please proceed.

Ms. Lianne Rood: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll take a moment to send my deepest condolences to all who have lost a loved one to COVID-19 and to wish a speedy recovery to those who are currently battling it. This truly is a difficult time for us all. We're fortunate to have all the great men and women on our front lines taking care of us, making sure that we're taken care of if we're sick, and also feeding us.

These unprecedented times started out with a glimmer of hope that, despite all that is being thrown at us, we'll face it together as a unified nation, all in this together. As time goes on, it's becoming abundantly clear, though, that this government's version of together unfortunately doesn't include the majority of my constituents in Lambton—Kent—Middlesex.

With each announcement and new government program, the question I keep hearing, whether from businesses or seniors, is “How is this supposed to help me?” There are so many cracks in the government's plan, and while the official opposition is doing everything it can to identify those cracks and help get support to the most vulnerable, the government not only ignores most of our proposals but has also attempted unprecedented power grabs.

While the tab for the support programs continues to accumulate, so many people and businesses continue to be left behind. A key industry left behind amidst all the government's support programs is agriculture. Whether it's a lack of labour, processing capacity issues, market access issues, inadequate BRM programs or food safety issues, this government has done very little.

When thinking about agriculture, processing capacity has been an issue for years, with the COVID-19 crisis further exacerbating this problem. Rob Lipsett of the Beef Farmers of Ontario has said it's “the biggest issue we've been trying to address at all levels of government”. With the closure of the Ryding-Regency plant, processing capacity issues have come to the forefront. The current situation is dire for beef farmers and they need a cash infusion program from the government.

Minister Bibeau has said that \$77 million promised for food processors has a goal of increasing capacity but is also to address short-term needs. How does this make sense when processing capacity is a structural problem? When questioned further, the minister just encourages producers to access the funding available through existing BRM programs. This is nothing new and not helpful to all our struggling producers. Yet again the Liberal government is showing us the different ways that it is continually letting down farmers and producers. It's obvious that farmers are not its priority.

When referring to the government's spending announcements on agriculture, Marcel Groleau, president of the Union des producteurs

agricoles, said, “I think they missed a great opportunity today. It's an announcement that is completely insufficient. Of the \$250 million for farmers, there is about \$125 million in new investment. Half of that is what producers would have gotten anyway.”

The B.C. Fruit Growers' Association said, “the financial support package to the Canadian agriculture industry announced...is profoundly underwhelming.”

When it comes to BRM reform, we can see that the Liberals are just recycling old promises. We've repeatedly called on this government to take strong action to support our farmers and producers, including reforming BRM programs. The bulk of what the government announced for agriculture amidst COVID-19 was \$125 million for AgriRecovery. This is not new money but a reannouncement of money that's already budgeted for in the yearly budget.

The minister has avoided questions. Where is she on where producers can access this money? Knowing that the program is difficult to work with and inaccessible, the minister has responded by telling producers to use an online calculator and to still apply. Great, farmers now have an online calculator to figure out how quickly their farmhouses are burning and whether they qualify for the government-issued bucket of water to be delivered at an undetermined point of time in the future.

Our producers and our farmers are being left behind, and they deserve better. This country is facing many trade disputes, especially when it comes to agriculture. Particularly with China, market access issues are at the forefront. Exports of commodities such as soybeans, canola and pork are facing additional challenges. The government says it is committed to helping farmers, but to their disappointment, the government has ignored all their pleas. On April 1, it even raised the carbon tax by 50%.

My constituents and millions of Canadians are facing significant and sustained hardship. With stagnant revenues and rapid debt accumulation, many are struggling to stay above water. At the very least they were hoping that their government would show them some type of mercy and hold off on raising their taxes.

To add insult to injury, the Prime Minister and the finance minister continue to deny the real impacts of the carbon tax. This outrageous claim that the carbon tax puts more money in Canadians' pockets keeps getting repeated over and over. No, our businesses and farmers' budgets don't balance themselves. On top of the direct costs, it's becoming harder and harder for our farmers to compete internationally against those who aren't burdened by punitive taxes.

I've heard from farmers in my own riding that they will be planting less corn this year, partially due to their drying costs having skyrocketed with the carbon tax. This is wrong, and the government isn't doing anything about it.

• (1610)

Food security has also become top of mind, especially when considering the reports of empty shelves throughout this pandemic. Coinciding with the lack of financial support for our farmers and producers, many of our family farms are experiencing hardships and are expected to go bankrupt. With just a fraction of what has been asked for being given to the agriculture sector, it is estimated that up to 15% of our farms, or about 30,000 farm families, will go out of business. This could be stopped if immediate and meaningful support is provided to safeguard our food security, and a critical sector of our economy and rural communities.

Canada's Conservatives will continue to press the Liberal government for real financial support for our agriculture sector. In fact, we have proposed a student jobs program to fill labour shortages in agriculture and agri-food. This could be a new federal program that would match students and young people with available jobs. I've heard from many farmers in my own riding that this would really help, but this government isn't moving on our proposal. For young Canadians, this could be an incredible opportunity to work in agriculture and gain valuable knowledge about where our food comes from. For our farmers and ranchers, they could get a great source of local labour to help fill the labour-shortage gaps.

This is just another example of a constructive Conservative solution to help those affected by COVID-19.

The government is also using this pandemic to seize the opportunity to circumvent democracy, bypass parliamentary accountability, and fundamentally change our firearms laws through an order in council. Rather than being accountable to parliament and having expert witnesses called to testify and analyze these changes, the government is bringing uncertainty and division to many of my constituents and millions of law-abiding Canadian firearms owners. This firearms ban will do nothing to protect public safety. Taking firearms away from law-abiding hunters and sport shooters does nothing to stop dangerous criminals who obtain their guns illegally. Instead, there should be investments made to support police anti-gang and anti-gun units, youth crime prevention, the CBSA firearms smuggling task force, border security, and increased funding for access to mental health and addiction treatments.

These are more constructive Conservative solutions to help combat gun violence. I hope the Liberals heed our calls. We all want a safe country, but needlessly attacking law-abiding firearms owners does nothing to improve public safety.

Another problem I continually hear about from my constituents is Internet access. Lambton—Kent—Middlesex is a rural riding and getting high-speed Internet access is a challenge for many, not to mention the cost of the service. During this pandemic I've had constituents who have seen monthly bills of \$500. I have seen no concrete solution from the government to help people in this situation. Being at home amidst this pandemic is difficult. With children learning online and people working from home, high-speed Internet accessibility is a necessity. We need to ensure that rural Canadians

have access to this service and don't have to pay exorbitant prices for it.

These are unprecedented times, but despite all of this happening, I am hopeful that all Canadians will get the help they need, and not just a select few. I am working hard every day to ensure that my constituents of Lambton—Kent—Middlesex are heard, and I am committed to fighting for them and getting the answers they deserve amidst this COVID-19 pandemic.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We'll now continue with Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I want to say that I'll be sharing my time with the member for Joliette and the member for Thérèse-De Blainville. Each member will have the floor for about three minutes.

Under the current circumstances related to COVID-19, as transport, infrastructure and communities critic, I'll use my time to speak about an important issue for me. I had the opportunity to ask the Minister of Transport questions about this issue on several occasions in a virtual meeting of the special committee on the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, the President of the Treasury Board answered my questions. I didn't find his responses particularly convincing, to be quite honest.

The issue is the travel credits provided by companies to consumers whose flights were cancelled.

Many people are suffering as a result of the COVID-19 situation, since the economy has virtually come to a standstill. People have lost their jobs, and some of them had already purchased airline tickets. They want to be able to pay their bills and mortgage, make their car payments, and make payments like everyone else. These people had hope when they saw that the economy was doing well. They decided to take a trip and to have a good time with their families. Unfortunately, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they lost their jobs. In addition to not taking a trip, they can't obtain a refund.

Imagine the state of these families. Some people paid \$1,000 for a small trip, but others paid \$2,000, \$3,000, \$4,000, \$5,000 or \$15,000. There's no limit to what airline tickets can cost, depending on the destination and the number of family members travelling. Understandably, when someone pays \$5,000, \$10,000 or \$15,000, they aren't very happy to have to pay that amount when their flight has been cancelled. Some people also paid for their trip with their credit card. They didn't necessarily have the money right away, but they thought that they would repay the amount after their trip. Today, they can't pay the amount.

We must show solidarity with everyone. We've seen that the government is standing firmly in solidarity with the airlines. However, we also want the government to stand firmly in solidarity with the individuals who are affected by this crisis and who would like to be able to pay their bills.

The airlines are certainly also affected by the crisis. Some airlines have lost 95% of their revenue. We understand this. However, we don't believe that the public should be responsible for funding the operating costs of these companies. If the companies need help, the government has implemented programs, such as the wage subsidies and the loans for large companies announced last week.

Some companies have already benefited from these programs. For example, Air Canada has already requested the 75% wage subsidy. Better yet, it obtained \$788 million from Export Development Canada, or EDC, to cover operating costs. This means that the government is funding these companies. The government is continuing to help the companies, but it isn't even asking them to reimburse their customers in return.

The strange thing here is that this violates the law. The government isn't requiring these companies to follow the law. Perhaps the reason is that these laws are Quebec laws and the Civil Code. We don't know why, but it seems that the federal government always has a hard time dealing with Quebec laws.

According to the Civil Code and Quebec's consumer protection act, when a service isn't rendered, even in cases of force majeure, the customer is entitled to a refund. When a customer has paid for a service, they're entitled to a refund when the service hasn't been rendered.

The government seems to have a great deal of difficulty understanding this. A federal institution is supposed to protect passengers and travellers, and that institution is the Canadian Transportation Agency. However, this agency told the airlines that, under the current circumstances, it believes that a 24-month travel credit is sufficient.

- (1615)

It's quite odd that the agency meant to protect consumers is actually protecting the airlines. Canadian federal institutions are providing a strange type of service. The even stranger thing is that the government isn't doing more to stand up for these individuals. Instead, the government is standing up for the airlines.

We're not asking for anything complicated. We're asking that the legislation and rules that exist and work be enforced. For any other service provider, any other company, this situation would be com-

pletely unacceptable. There seems to be a free pass for the airlines. We know that one airline in particular is closer to the government. Under these circumstances, people are wondering why the government isn't listening.

We've taken all sorts of steps. I said that I asked the minister questions. I've actually asked several ministers questions about this issue. My leader spoke about the issue at a press conference today. Option consommateurs approached us. The organization also approached the government and wrote to the Minister of Finance, the Canadian Transportation Agency and the Minister of Transport to explain that the government is currently telling businesses to engage in illegal practices. How can a government allow companies to engage in illegal practices? The government has been warned.

Option consommateurs asked me whether I was willing to sponsor a petition for the organization. I told the organization that I was willing to do so, of course. As members of Parliament, we have the right to sponsor petitions that can be tabled in the House of Commons. The clerk authorized the petition. In a few days, the petition obtained almost 5,000 signatures. This means that many people are affected by this situation. Not just two or three privileged people are affected, but many people.

We're sometimes told that companies will go bankrupt. Take Air Canada, which received over \$800 million from the government. Its financial statements showed \$6 billion. Some people say that this may seem substantial, but with major expenses, a big figure like that means nothing. I agree, but let's consider the following. This company claims that it's losing \$20 million a day in operating costs. If we divide the \$6 billion in its coffers by \$20 million, the company has cash flow for a year before it runs into financial difficulties.

I'm not sure whether the average person who purchased airline tickets has a year's worth of cash before they run into financial difficulties. Most people are no longer able to make their payments after a paycheque or two. Who's the priority? Does the government want to help people who are struggling to make their payments or a large company that has enough money in its coffers for the next year? That's the real question.

Of the \$6 billion in Air Canada's accounts, \$2.6 billion belongs to customers. That amount isn't \$2.6 million or \$2.60. We're talking about \$1,000 or \$2,000 airline tickets. The company is refusing to refund the money that belongs to customers. Everywhere else in the world, particularly in the United States and in the European Union countries, there's enough common sense to say that companies must reimburse customers if flights are cancelled. In Canada, we live in another world, a world where airlines take precedence over individuals and consumers.

We believe that these companies must reimburse their customers. The government hasn't heard the last of us. In any event, it won't win. The airlines can't confiscate this money forever. It's illegal. Three class action lawsuits have already been launched against these companies whose practices are illegal.

The government is defending the indefensible. Rather than continuing to defend questionable practices, it should be telling these companies that they won't receive any money until they reimburse consumers, people who are entitled to a refund.

The strange thing is that the government is speaking to these companies. We need only look at the registry of lobbyists to see that calls are made almost daily between these companies and the government. The government has had many opportunities to let these companies know that consumers are entitled to receive their money. They spent this money on trips that they couldn't take.

These people are being offered a 24-month credit. However, I'm not sure that these people will be in a strong enough position to travel in a few months. I'm not sure that they'll want to travel or that they'll be healthy enough to do so. I'm not sure that their employers will allow them to travel. I'm not even sure that they'll be able to pay for their ticket.

• (1620)

The company is telling them that they'll have \$2,000 if the ticket cost \$2,000, but that there's no guarantee that the ticket will still cost \$2,000 in six months. If the ticket price increases to \$4,000 or \$5,000, then it's too bad for them. They'll need to pay the difference.

So we can understand their frustration.

We won't give up.

• (1625)

The Chair: Mr. Ste-Marie now has the floor.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Mr. Chair, first I would like to congratulate my colleague from Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères for his excellent speech on the importance of protecting consumer rights.

We're talking about airline tickets here. When you look at what's being done in Europe, the United States and around the world, air carriers are required to reimburse consumers for tickets they've paid for where trips have been cancelled. Assistance programs are bound by this condition. Canada is the lone exception. I therefore strongly encourage my esteemed colleague to continue the fight with Option consommateurs. This has to change; consumers must be reimbursed.

I'm going to talk about emergency economic support measures. Many measures have been introduced to support workers' incomes. My colleague from Thérèse-De Blainville, who will be speaking immediately after me, will tell you in greater detail about the new changes being made to urge people to go back to work.

The employment insurance system was initially intended to support incomes in an economic crisis. We're currently in the midst of a health crisis and the system has failed. Consequently, the government has introduced the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy.

The wage subsidy was initially 10%. It was a half-baked system. The government told businesses to withhold amounts from the payments they were required to make to it. The Bloc québécois looked at what was being done elsewhere in the world, in Denmark, for ex-

ample. We made some demands, and we're pleased with what has been put forward.

Fixed costs are a serious problem for SMEs. That's an important point. The organizations representing SMEs have been telling the government that and telling us too since the crisis began. Wages are an issue, but fixed costs are too, and they have to be addressed. That's why we managed to add a measure to the motion passed in the House on April 11 requiring the government to introduce measures to support and assist businesses with fixed costs.

We waited, but we got virtually nothing. You could say the mountain laboured and more or less brought forth a mouse. There was rent assistance, but it's awkward, very limited and poorly put together. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business, the CFIB, has demanded that the program be completely overhauled.

The Conseil québécois du commerce de détail, CQCD, reports that 40% of its members who are entitled to assistance say the owners of the premises they lease for their businesses refuse to join it. It's not working for nearly half of SMEs that are entitled to assistance because landlords don't want to cooperate. They ultimately feel it's preferable to write off their losses because then they'll have fewer hassles and, ultimately, less tax payable. It's not working.

We discussed this in the Standing Committee on Finance meeting yesterday afternoon with the management of CMHC, which will manage the program. They said they were surprised it wasn't working. Logically speaking, it's true that landlords would have every reason to enter into this kind of agreement, but, in actual fact, nearly half of them prefer to write off the losses. They can't be bothered. So the program is poorly put together, poorly suited. That has to change.

There's assistance for rent, which represents a significant portion of fixed costs. The Prime Minister noted this earlier. However, all other fixed costs have to be considered as well. Every SME has its own structure and fixed costs, such as wages. It's not just about rent. In the case of businesses, yes, but that's not always the case for other SMEs. We need flexibility and a program in order to help them.

Our humble proposal is that a refundable tax credit be introduced for fixed costs.

• (1630)

The business would first have to prove it's been affected by the current crisis and has experienced a decline in revenue. For example, that might mean a 30% drop in recent months. Then it would be questioned about its fixed costs and asked to provide proof, just as it usually does when filing its year-end tax return. It would receive a refundable tax credit equivalent to half of its expenses. Why half? Simply because the government's rent assistance program for SMEs covers 50% of its rent expenses.

Getting back to the emergency rent assistance program, since building and commercial property owners don't necessarily want to participate in it, we're asking the government to provide assistance equal to half the cost directly to the SME renting the premises. It could make do with that and it would be more effective. Why not do that since a large number of commercial landlords don't want to join this program?

Furthermore, as regards our fixed costs tax credit proposal, SMEs that want it could include their rent expenses. This method would be further to the motion adopted in the House ordering the government to introduce a measure to assist SMEs with fixed costs. A simple refundable tax credit for fixed costs would work well.

The rent assistance program also has to be changed as a result of a serious problem. SMEs are required to prove they have suffered a decline in revenue as a result of COVID-19, which is normal. However, it has to be a 70% decline. That's neither the 15% that was the case for the first period covered by the wage subsidy nor 30%, as was the case for the others. It's more than double. This specifically targets small businesses whose turnover has collapsed. I think we need fixed costs assistance that covers a larger percentage of SMEs. The criterion could be set at 30%, as is the case for the wage subsidy, and the same figure could be used for the fixed costs tax credit.

To recap, on April 11, the House adopted a motion directing the government to introduce measures respecting fixed costs, but, apart from the introduction of a modest rent assistance program that doesn't work and must be completely overhauled, as the Canadian Federation of Independent Business stated, nothing has been done. We therefore request a tax credit.

We also have another request. SMEs are currently in considerable difficulty. Under the emergency loan program, they may apply for a \$40,000 loan, and, if they repay it on time, the government will allow them to retain \$10,000 in the form of a grant. We ask that the government make a more sustained effort by increasing the \$10,000 amount to \$20,000. That would really help businesses, especially with their fixed costs. Economic activity has stopped, and none of the lost income can be recovered. We therefore ask the government to provide more assistance to SMEs by doubling the portion of the loan that may be retained as a grant. This is important for us.

Today, the Minister of Finance announced the details of his loan program for large businesses. Those businesses will have five years to repay their loans. We believe the same condition should apply to SMEs. Rather than require them to repay their loans before the end of 2022, they should be granted a five-year period as well.

I've discussed fixed costs, but now we're going to talk about amendments that should be made to the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. This will be very interesting. I now turn the floor over to my colleague from Thérèse-De Blainville.

• (1635)

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Thérèse-De Blainville has the floor.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thanks to my colleagues for their excellent speeches on issues concerning the current crisis. Yes, it's repeatedly called a health crisis, but it's also an economic one, and I would add that it's a social and humanitarian one as well.

I'm going to use my 10 minutes to review a matter of considerable importance to the Bloc québécois and to me personally as well. As the party's employment and labour critic, I believe we as a party have been on the offensive from the outset and have come up with more proposals than non-responses.

We know the government's response was the prompt introduction of a Canadian emergency benefit. That benefit was helpful, and we should remember why. The employment insurance system, as we know it, has not been reviewed in 40 years and includes rules that have become obsolete. As a result, in this crisis, it wasn't up to the task for which it was established.

The Canada Emergency Response Benefit has provided an income during the crisis to many workers who were ineligible for employment insurance. We subsequently saw that some people fell through the net, and we therefore improved it.

I'm thinking of seasonal industry workers. It was initially said that they had not lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19. However, we were forced to admit that, if they hadn't lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19, they were prevented from finding, or hoping to find, a job by COVID-19. Consequently, necessary and beneficial adjustments were made for workers.

The Canada Emergency Student Benefit was introduced last Friday. In a motion passed on April 29, we agreed that the Canada Emergency Student Benefit was necessary. We all agreed. The Bloc moreover vigorously demanded it, as it did other measures such as assistance for our seniors.

Students experienced a crisis as well. First, there was an educational crisis, and we know that their lives have been disrupted in that respect. Second, they were afraid they wouldn't be able to find jobs. Contrary to the opinions of some, our students are far from lazy or from disliking work. On the contrary, work for them is an extension of their student life or something that will ultimately provide them with the necessary financial resources to resume their studies. That counts. They're an entire generation that we don't want to sacrifice. We supported that assistance. We demanded it.

However, we also demanded that the workers and students receiving these necessary support measures, the CERB and the CESB, not be deprived of them for returning, as we hope they do, to high-quality jobs as soon as possible. We would like life to turn out that way, but it won't. The unemployment rate is 17%. We had a black Friday when two million jobs were lost in a single day. I think we need to continue this emergency support but still allow the economy and work to resume. We can't think about recovery or economic recovery without considering workers or the essential role students play.

• (1640)

Paragraph (e) of the motion we adopted on April 29 reads as follows:

(e) the government ensure that the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) are offered in a manner that meets their objective while encouraging employment in all circumstances;

What saddens me, not to say angers me, is that we gave our word in paragraph (e) of the April 29 motion. A commitment was made. In a previous life, I conducted many negotiations with employers at the local level and governments at the national level.

When you sign a contract or a collective agreement, or when you ultimately negotiate something, you have to keep the word you give. That's not the case here. We agreed, in making that commitment, looking each other in the eye, that something should be done to prevent a person who had an incentive to work, who earned more than \$1,000, who earned \$1,001, from being subject to an all-for-nothing policy, in short, to prevent that person from losing the \$2,000 CERB or the \$1,250 CESB.

That undermines an economic recovery, a recovery, and it also undermines a commitment in which we agreed, here in the House, on the ground rules of our governance, of our Parliament.

In my opinion, giving your word is a serious matter. If the minister responsible for the negotiations, the first deputy minister, were present, she, who largely conducted the negotiations, could tell us how fundamentally important it is to give one's word.

One may feel cheated because something has been broken. When we give our word on commitments and proposals, we expect to keep it.

Among my questions to the ministers today, I asked at least four questions on this point. Asking questions but not getting answers is another disappointment. Is it the question that isn't right? I don't think so; there are no bad questions. I wouldn't say there are bad answers, but we at least deserve answers.

The Bloc made two points. First, we asked what the conditions were. Second, we acknowledged that interim rules had been adopted so we could have a parliamentary life and operate within the framework of the crisis, but, at the same time, we could not commit to something the conditions of which were not met by the other party.

In the past 10 minutes, I have spoken to you about questions concerning employment and labour for which I feel we are already struggling for answers. However, one day we'll have to consider certain questions. We're in transition; we're recovering. Some things

must be improved, and other things must be reviewed. I'm thinking of the CERB, which will come to an end. When it does, what will happen to the employment insurance program? What will happen to all those workers who were ineligible for it? How will we make the transition, particularly in the measures we wanted to introduce concerning employment incentives and to improve the employment situation? Ultimately, we want to support workers and students and tell them they need this but that they are capable of improving their situation.

I will close by saying that responsibility cannot fall to a single party in any negotiation, contract or commitment.

I therefore encourage the government to tell us by Monday when and how it will honour the commitments it made on April 29.

• (1645)

[*English*]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Burnaby South.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll be sharing my speaking time with the very honourable member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie.

[*English*]

Thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts during this crisis.

Before I go any further, I want to take a moment to express on behalf of all New Democrats our condolences to the friends and family of Captain Jennifer Casey. It's a really tragic loss of life. Her work is something that she was very proud of. She spent time here in Ottawa, so there are lots of folks in Ottawa who had connections with Captain Casey. She studied at Carleton, and folks knew her as someone who was always a positive person, willing to help out anyone who needed it. People talked about how proud she was of the work she did with the Snowbirds' Operation Inspiration and with the Snowbirds in general.

I also want to send our best wishes for a quick and speedy recovery to Captain Richard MacDougall, and to his friends and family as well, as he was injured in the operation also.

Madam Chair, there has been some talk about what Parliament should look like. I just want to touch on that very briefly.

Parliament is here to serve the people we represent, and it should always be here for that purpose. During this crisis, our goal as New Democrats is to ensure first and foremost that the priority of every government program must be to ensure that help gets to people.

One of those things is directly getting help to people through things like the CERB. We are going to continually push to make sure people don't fall through the cracks. Right now, there are far too many people who are desperately in need but who cannot access the CERB due to a minor loophole or a criterion they don't meet.

I want those folks to know that we see you, we hear you, and we are going to continue to fight to make sure you are not forgotten. We want the CERB to function in such a way that anyone who needs it, anyone who is desperate right now, anyone who is struggling right now should be able to access it. That's the way the program should be designed.

During a global pandemic, for some reason the government seems focused on designing programs to exclude a mythical person they think is not going to receive help at the risk of those who need it most falling through the cracks. To me, that is the wrong approach. I would rather ensure a program does not miss anyone, and if some receive help who don't need it, we can easily tax that back next year during the tax season.

We believe that there are ways to use this space, use the tools of Parliament to continue to push the government to deliver more. That's what we've been able to do so far. Using a combination of virtual and in-person sittings, we've been able to push the government, and we are proud that we were able to raise these concerns that so many people were being missed by the government.

We got commitments to include students, and then students were included. We got commitments to address the fact that seniors were completely missed, that those who are the most vulnerable did not have any increased support during this difficult time. We pushed the government and succeeded in achieving that as well. We brought in motions for Canadians living with disabilities, who are also being forgotten by this government. There was a commitment made, but to date there is still no help for Canadians living with disabilities, no increased support, and we're going to continue to push for that.

We talked about increasing the wage subsidy from 10%. We cited countries like Denmark, the U.K. and Sweden, which are doing at least 75%, and the government weeks later agreed to going to 75%.

We have fought for and achieved some significant gains for people, for workers, during this crisis, and we want to continue to do that. It should be done in a way that's safe, that ensures the most access possible for members of Parliament so that they can represent their constituents, and it should follow the expert advice of public health professionals.

One of the areas where we want to continue to push this government is something that I want to make really clear is no longer a choice. It is no longer a choice for someone to have paid sick leave or not. It must be guaranteed. Every Canadian needs access to paid sick leave of at least two weeks. We are suggesting that during this difficult time it might be a difficult burden for businesses at this point, so we are saying the government should implement paid sick leave for all Canadians of at least two weeks by using the CERB and the employment insurance programs that exist.

• (1650)

We need to deliver. That is something that should no longer be a question. It should be answered in the affirmative. We need paid sick leave for all Canadians.

No longer should Canadians have to make that difficult choice about going to work. Do they go in to work, knowing that they might infect a colleague? If they stay home, they won't be paid, because there's no paid sick leave. Then they risk not being able to pay their bills or not being able to put food on the table. That is not a choice Canadians should have to make. That's why we're going to continue to push for paid sick leave.

It's not a call that we're making in isolation. We have heard from provinces. Provincial leaders and governments have raised this concern. Businesses have raised this concern. Paid sick leave is vital, and we're going to continue to push for it. Specifically, we've heard some leadership from Premier Horgan, who said that this is an opportunity for the federal government to step up and provide leadership in a federal program that provides paid sick leave.

[*Translation*]

The guideline from public health officials is clear: people must stay home if they're sick. As I said, they can't do that if they have to choose between doing the right thing and working a day for pay.

We'll continue to urge the government to do what must be done and to provide paid sick leave for all workers under existing federal programs such as employment insurance and the CERB.

[*English*]

The other really troubling part of this crisis that has been simply heartbreaking is that the impact of this pandemic has been borne on the backs of seniors, particularly seniors living in long-term care homes. It is heartbreaking when we think about that for a moment. If we just pause and think about those who are most vulnerable, those who have lived their entire lives sacrificing and working to be a part of building up this country, it is not just heartbreaking that those seniors are the ones who have suffered the most, it is wrong.

What we are saying is that we need the federal government to show leadership to push for a care guarantee. What does that mean? It means we want to know that seniors are guaranteed good-quality care. Loved ones want to know that their parents and grandparents are cared for, and workers need a guarantee that they will have the equipment they need to stay safe and have a good salary to be able to work and do their job.

I know the Prime Minister has said that he doesn't believe it's his job, that it's not the federal government's job, that it's not the Prime Minister's job to address long-term care, that it's a provincial jurisdiction. In the face of 82% of the deaths from COVID-19 being seniors in long-term care, in the face of the military being called in to long-term care homes, I reject the idea that the federal government has no role to play. The federal government can play a role.

One of the most significant roles the federal government can play is to fund long-term care and to increase funding for health care. The federal government can acknowledge decades of neglect and decades of reduction in health care transfers. At one point, our health care transfers were 50:50 in terms of responsibilities between provincial governments and federal, and now they're closer to 80:20, with 80% of the responsibility being borne by the provinces and 20% coming from transfers from the federal government. That is simply wrong, and it needs to be reversed.

Someone told me to think about the fact that our armed forces, those men and women who provide incredible service for our country and are proud to help out in any way that they can, whether it's a disaster or serving abroad, had to be called in to care for seniors in long-term care homes. That is something we should be ashamed of—not that we should be ashamed of the hard-working men and women, but that we should be ashamed of the fact that it got to that point.

That's why I'm saying to the government, yes, you can play a federal role. You must play a leadership role in fighting for better for these seniors so that this never happens again.

• (1655)

[*Translation*]

The Prime Minister likes to say that what's happening in long-term care in Canada is the provinces' problem, but what does he think about the fact that applying Stephen Harper's cuts to health transfers has faced the provinces with a \$31 billion revenue shortfall over 10 years?

[*English*]

These are cuts that were planned by the Conservatives, by Prime Minister Stephen Harper. They were implemented by the Liberal government and Prime Minister Trudeau.

In Ontario, we've also learned something else. It's something that's been clear across the country, but in Ontario it's been glaring. Those seniors who lived in for-profit homes were the most vulnerable. They were four times more likely to die from COVID-19 in a for-profit home than in a not-for-profit. That evidence alone should make it very clear that profit has no place in the care of seniors.

I will make it really clear: As New Democrats, our position is that we need to remove profit from any care of seniors. We've heard from the previous health minister, Ms. Philpott, that if you look at the business model of companies that are trying to make profit when it comes to seniors, the fact they are clearly trying to make money is going to impact the way they deliver care. It means that they are going to cut services. It means they're going to cut staffing. It means they're going to cut corners to generate that profit. If nothing else, it means that in order to generate a profit some of the money won't be reinvested into care for the residents. Some of the money will be siphoned to profit.

For-profit long-term care homes are extremely lucrative. We're talking about revenues in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Now, those revenues are made by the company, meaning they don't go to the staff and they don't go to the residents who need the care.

One of the things that we need to make absolutely clear is that we know some immediate fixes. We need to get profit out of the system. We also need to make sure that workers are paid good salaries so they can work and do their jobs.

Workers in long-term care homes often have to work in multiple centres. It means that they risk exposure to illnesses or potentially spreading illnesses. They don't often have the protective equipment they need. To put these workers at risk, and to put these residents at risk, is something we should consider a risk to all of us.

We need to look at families that want to know that their loved ones are being cared for. Families need to know that their parents and their loved ones are being cared for and that's the care guarantee.

I want to turn quickly to the future of the CERB. We know that this crisis has had a massive impact on our economy and on jobs. There are many sectors that are going to be impacted differently. Those involved in live music, entertainment, festivals and cultural activities are in the sectors hardest hit and will be some of the last, or slowest, to recover. We need to look at a more permanent solution or a longer extension of the CERB to help out those folks impacted.

We also need to look at the impact of this crisis on exposing some of the weaknesses in our system. The fact is that our social safety net is not there. The fact is that we cannot go back to normal. We need to go forward to something better. That's what we're committed to doing: pharmacare, dental care, head-to-toe health care coverage. Investment in people now is the best way to recover. We're going to hear from Conservatives who are going to talk about debt and deficit as a way to raise fear and have people be afraid to invest in one another, to take care of one another. I think that is the worst thing we can do. We've seen in the past that when we invest in people we have better results.

I'll wrap up with this. I talked about this earlier. Any cent of public dollars that goes toward supporting businesses has to be focused on supporting workers. Every dollar, every cent has to be connected to job protection or job creation. We don't want to see any money go to a company that's going to pay more money to its CEO, give bonuses or give money to its shareholders. Money must be strictly allotted to job creation and job protection.

Finally, there's no way that any money should go to a company that is using offshore tax havens to cheat the system. That should not be allowed. I again call on the government to fix its proposals to end CEO bonuses as well as offshore tax havens.

• (1700)

Money should go to people, not to the profits of companies.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'm sharing my time with—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Carol Hughes: We'll now go to the honourable member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie.

Mr. Boulerice, go ahead.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Madam Chair, I want to congratulate the leader of the NDP for his excellent speech.

In my introduction, I will be talking about health care, a topic he addressed at the end of his speech. He in a way opened the door for me by saying that, as New Democrats and progressives, we think that health care shouldn't be a business that seeks to make profits and money. We don't want long-term centres that care for our seniors serving mainly to line the pockets of their executives or shareholders.

People will say we're exaggerating, that we should be more flexible and that there could be exceptions, rules and a framework. I don't know whether everyone has heard this story, which goes back a few weeks. Many things are happening now, and we tend to forget them these days.

I want to go back to the case of the private Herron CHSLD, in Dorval, where an absolutely horrific crisis occurred. Montreal's public health authorities had to take over management of that private institution. People entered the facility at one point and realized that seniors had died and that their bodies were still in their beds. Bodies lay on the floor because they had fallen and no one had been there to pick them up. Patients had not been washed in weeks. Some had not eaten for days and were dehydrated because they hadn't been given water. Workers were so underpaid and their working conditions so poor that they left the premises when the crisis began. As a result, there weren't enough staff to care for the seniors and elderly patients.

It cost between \$3,000 and \$10,000 a month to live at the Herron CHSLD. These people had paid thousands of dollars every month, and some were injured or ill or had died in a total absence of dignity. As a community, we must ensure that this kind of thing never occurs again.

The situation in Quebec is worrying, although we've recently seen a glimmer of hope. People are beginning to come out of confinement, there has been a certain amount of economic recovery, and businesses are reopening. We hope it'll all go well. I encourage everyone to continue exercising caution and to abide by the rules. It must nevertheless be understood that more than 3,800 deaths have occurred in Quebec since the COVID-19 pandemic began, a figure that represents more than 50% of cases in Canada.

Once again, I want to thank and congratulate all the workers in our health care system who are making enormous sacrifices and displaying incredible courage. They do not stint on the number hours they must work. However, legitimate demands are emerging, in particular, from nurses, lab technicians and other health professionals. These people are getting tired and are entitled to a vacation this summer. I also hope that, in the next few years, they will be entitled to better working conditions, higher wages and more protective medical equipment.

Talking about courage, I'd like to tell the story of Marcelin François, one of the people who answered the call and was involved in providing care to seniors. He worked in a factory five days a week and in CHSLDs on weekends. He had registered with an employment agency that assigned people from one CHSLD to another, a practice that was already quite risky and that ultimately

led to his death. Mr. François contracted COVID-19 while working at a CHSLD and died in mid-April.

I mention Mr. François because you should know that his wife, family and he arrived in Canada a few years ago by a route that made the headlines and was the subject of much discussion in the House: Roxham Road. Mr. François was in fact a refugee, and asylum claimant, who did all he could to give his family a new chance and a new life.

His is a dramatic story, but one that also explodes some myths and prejudices. Here in the House, refugees and asylum-seekers have often been described as people who pose a danger to our society, who want to take advantage of the system and take our place. At times, we have even heard parties further to the right than ours say they were potential criminals.

• (1705)

One realizes from this true-life example that this man and his wife had come here to participate in our society, to help our society. This man wanted so much to help society that he went to work in the riskiest possible place and paid for it with his life.

Remember that all these asylum-seekers, most of whom come from Haiti but also from African and Latin American countries, have actually come here for a new life, to escape oppression and misery. I think we should be able to reconsider the way certain columnists and even certain media view the contribution these people make and the way we should treat them.

What we of the NDP want is for the process to be expedited for all these workers who currently provide essential services to the public and who have no status because they are asylum-seekers so that they can be granted a status, at least permanent resident status, which would afford them a degree of protection and confidence in the future. We're talking about a few hundreds of individuals. I think that, if these people put their health and safety at risk to care for and protect our seniors, the least we can do would be to recognize that contribution by affording them a little more security of status in Quebec and Canada.

With respect to essential workers, I want to signal the work done by all the individuals in our cities and towns, all the municipalities, who maintain our services so we can still enjoy potable water, garbage collection and buses that run in our cities to ensure our communities operate properly.

As I said a little earlier today, municipalities unfortunately receive no assistance from the federal government. The municipalities are currently an administrative creature of the provincial governments. We are well aware of that fact.

We of the NDP are convinced that, in a crisis such as this, we can sit around the table, discuss issues and find solutions. This wouldn't be the first time a special federal-provincial-municipal program was introduced. That has occurred tens of times with respect to infrastructure. We could repeat the process now because the municipalities are truly in a bind and increasingly ringing alarm bells.

At a press conference just yesterday, the mayor of Montreal issued a heartfelt statement about the coming fiscal abyss, wondering where she could find \$500 million.

The municipalities, which are not allowed to run deficits, have two remaining options: either raise property taxes, which would be catastrophic in the current situation, or reduce public services.

Considering a figure as impressive as half a billion dollars, what municipal services do you think can be cut? The situation is impossible and unmanageable. I think the federal and provincial governments must cooperate because neither the transit corporations nor the municipalities currently have access to programs such as the emergency wage subsidy. They are genuinely left to their own devices.

Unfortunately, the federal government is also dragging its feet on another issue, and this is absolutely incomprehensible. I'm talking about the asymmetrical bilateral agreement between the governments of Quebec and Canada on social housing. We've known this was coming for months now. The first time we discussed the need for a social housing agreement between Quebec City and Ottawa was two and a half years ago, in 2017.

We'll be running into a wall in July, when a housing crisis will occur. With rising rents and lost jobs and reduced incomes for people, they'll no longer be able to stay in the housing they now enjoy and will be forced to find other accommodation.

The rental vacancy rate in Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie is 1%. What other housing can these people find? Will they have to move to other neighbourhoods? Will they have to relocate their families, and will their children no longer be able to attend the same schools in September?

We've been dragging our feet for years now and we'll feel the consequences this summer, in July. If we could at least reach an agreement, we could start work to provide social housing and affordable housing for next year, for 2021 and 2022, to avoid making the same mistake again.

One federal government minister warned us in February that this was coming. Nothing has happened yet, and it's now past mid-May.

Is this because we're engaged in a petty squabble over who'll decide on standards and money and what flag will fly over the building?

- (1710)

I consider these squabbles utterly appalling, at a time when lives are at stake. I discussed a simple solution a little earlier: that we send Quebec the \$1.5 billion that it's owed and that has been sitting here in Ottawa for two years. Quebec has a good program, AccèsLogis, on which there has been virtually unanimous agreement. We could use it to begin new housing construction.

Among the somewhat odd things the Liberal government is doing, there is its tendency to turn a blind eye to tax havens while falsely arguing that we want to set workers against each other. No, we don't want to set workers against each other. We're simply saying that a person who doesn't pay his fair share of tax, for example, shouldn't expect to receive taxpayer assistance.

This lax government turns a blind eye and overlooks the fact that businesses cheat by sending their money to the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands and Barbados. By maintaining the status quo, this arrangement enables them to take the public's money and avoid paying their taxes, while this costs us tens of billions of dollars every year. This is utterly unacceptable.

I'm going to discuss another Liberal government shortcoming. Large companies receive money, and that's fine, because the crisis has hit everyone. They have a lot of employees and we want them to continue their operations. The Minister of Finance has announced a new assistance program for large businesses in addition to the 75% wage subsidy. Companies can rely on two programs, which is promising. However, could we request commitments or demand guarantees in some instances that these amounts actually serve Canadian workers?

The NDP very much suspects that this money will be used instead to pay bonuses to officers or dividends to shareholders or to provide employment for people who do not work in Quebec or Canada. For example, Air Canada is a company that benefits simultaneously from the two programs. And yet it continues to lay off employees. The machinists union contacted us to discuss some absurd situations.

Several aircraft in the Air Canada fleet operate around the world, but especially in the United States. Those aircraft require daily maintenance. Air Canada, which is receiving assistance from Quebec and Canadian taxpayers, currently leaves its aircraft in the United States, and American workers are maintaining them. Given the billions of dollars provided to Air Canada, we could demand that it repatriate its aircraft to Quebec and Canada so they can be maintained by Quebec and Canadian workers. That's unfortunately not the current situation, and we find it utterly deplorable.

We're also concerned about Internet access. The present crisis clearly shows the extent to which the Internet has become a vital public service for economic activity, communications and our ability to continue working via telework and videoconferencing.

Two federal funds have been established to cover more territory and serve more communities that do not have Internet access. One of them is managed by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, or CRTC, and the other, the \$1.7 billion universal broadband fund, is managed by the Department of Innovation, Science and Economic Development. One of our fears is that contracts may be awarded to telecommunications giants and that they will parcel the work out to subcontractors, who will take a percentage of the profits and outsource to other subcontractors.

Ultimately, how will the regions and territories covered be selected? Will authorities act in the interests of the telecommunications giants and their subcontractors or in those of the public, of the people who currently don't enjoy this absolutely vital service? We will continue asking questions on this subject.

I would like to take this opportunity to say that I very much appreciate the opportunity to have five-minute discussions with the ministers during these plenary committee meetings. However, this subject is a good example of an issue for which the debate parameters should be slightly expanded so that we can discuss matters that concern people but which are not necessarily related to the pandemic or the current crisis.

• (1715)

[English]

Mrs. Carol Hughes: The honourable member for Nanaimo—Ladysmith, Mr. Manly.

Mr. Paul Manly: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's an honour to rise in the House again and to be here.

I'd like to acknowledge that we are on the traditional territory of the Algonquin first nation as uninvited guests. To them I say *meegwetch*.

I'd like to acknowledge the hard work of my staff members, who have been working overtime during this crisis. Answering the phone calls and the emails, and dealing with constituents in crisis, is difficult work. I really appreciate what they've done, and I know the constituents do as well.

I'd like to thank the government for its response, and I know that many Canadians have needed help and are getting help. The opposition and members of the Liberal backbench have brought forth all kinds of issues and gaps in the programs, and the government has been responsive and has been helping Canadians. I think it's really important at this time that we have this unity, working together, because our constituents and Canadians are important. They need our help, and playing politics during a pandemic and a crisis isn't the right thing to do. Working together to make sure that we deal with people, and help them with their problems, is the right thing to do.

There are still many needs that people have. For small businesses, too many are still falling through the cracks and are unable to access relief. A lot of micro-businesses are having problems. Some landlords won't sign the new CECRA program. In cases where landlords refuse to co-operate, commercial tenants should be able to apply directly to the government. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business's latest report found that half of small businesses surveyed cannot make their June rent. We're asking the government to allow tenants to access the 50% rental funding when land-

lords don't agree to opt in to the CECRA program. We're also asking that the government ease the 70% revenue drop criteria for CECRA so more businesses can apply.

CEBA, the business account, still requires a business chequing account. I know that the government has promised changes to that, and I'm looking forward to hearing about those changes. This is something that opposition members have brought up a number of times.

Many in the arts and music industry who rely on summer business will need a lot more help to survive until next year. I'm thinking about all of the festivals and the industries behind them that support them. RSM Productions in Nanaimo, a sound and lighting company, has lost all of its contracts. It is a company that needs help.

Municipalities have experienced staggering drops in revenue, and increased costs. They must continue to provide essential services including police, fire, water, sewage and waste management, regardless of those lost revenues. They're going to have trouble collecting property taxes from businesses and homeowners in financial distress. In my community, they've had free public transit, but ridership has been down to next to nothing anyway. The FCM estimates that municipal transit systems are incurring monthly losses of about \$400 million due to diminished ridership, part of at least \$10 billion to \$15 billion in near-term, non-recoverable losses due to COVID-19.

We need to help municipalities. I understand that they are under provincial jurisdiction, but we work with municipalities with the green infrastructure fund and with the gas tax, and we need to be able to help municipalities weather this storm.

Aboriginal friendship centres have been asking for more help. I know the Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre in my community provides a broad spectrum of important programs for the 12,000 urban indigenous people in my riding, including a health centre, youth and elder housing, a safe house for homeless youth, a home for single moms and a food hamper program. It also provides mental health and addiction counselling, and continues to provide that online during this crisis. It's an integral part of the urban indigenous community, and it's seriously struggling. It hasn't received any funding yet, and it's expecting to receive maybe \$25,000 to \$30,000. I'm hoping that the government steps up with more funding for urban aboriginal organizations.

• (1720)

Many non-profit organizations are suffering. In B.C., non-profits contribute \$6.4 billion to the economy and employ 86,000 people. However, 78% are facing serious disruption, 74% have seen a large decrease in funding, and at least 19% are shutting down permanently.

I was disappointed to see the government contract with Amazon rather than Canada Post for delivering PPE. That's because of the way Amazon treats its employees. We see that Jeff Bezos is now on track to becoming the first trillionaire. In contrast, our Canada Post employees are paid well, they work hard for their money and they return that money into our economy. The Canadian Union of Postal Workers has great ideas for how it can improve things in our economy, including public banking and more energy-efficient delivery systems, so we really need to be supporting our Crown corporations rather than a trillionaire.

Our airlines have really let down passengers. The local chamber of commerce bought tickets to go to two separate conferences, and when they cancelled those tickets they got a voucher for 11 months from the day of cancellation. How are they going to use that for the annual conference next year? That's completely useless to them. I have constituents who have tickets that the airline said they needed to use before September, but there are no bookings before September. Therefore, the airlines are letting people down. We need to stand up for consumers in this country the same way that the Europeans and the Americans do and make sure that the passengers get a refund or at least a voucher that they can use. Eleven months is ridiculous. Four months is ridiculous.

People living on CPP disability need relief and really need a permanent increase in their benefits so that they are on par with the benefits that the province gives people on disability.

With our health care system, we've seen the need for improving health care, and we know there's a \$15 billion deficit just in maintenance in our health care system; and our long-term care system needs to be brought into the health care system properly so that our seniors are not abandoned to a for-profit model.

Regarding CPP, OAS and GIS, our seniors have been asking for a raise in these things for a long time. They deserve it. The cost of living in my riding has gone way up. Because real estate values have escalated in the last five years, the cost of renting a place has driven up the cost of living. We need to take these things into con-

sideration. It's not the same in every part of the country, but in some parts of this country it is out of control.

I know there are worries about fraud in the relief programs, but we see fraud in other areas. We see polluters who abandon their messes, declare bankruptcy and then leave it for us, the citizens and the taxpayers, to clean up. That's privatizing the profits and socializing the losses, and that needs to end.

We also need to make sure that offshoring of wealth, whether that's legal through loopholes or illegal through tax evasion, is stopped. We lose about \$19 billion a year in taxes, through tax evasion or tax avoidance.

One of the things I've been talking about here for a while is a guaranteed livable income. It's similar to the basic income or universal basic income that's proposed, but we base it upon a basket of goods, the same way that a living wage would, so that people have the things they need to survive. It's an idea that has gained support across the political spectrum, but the Greens have been talking about this for several decades. In fact, 50 Canadian senators have written to the Canadian Prime Minister, calling for a minimum basic income for Canadians. The GLI establishes an income floor below which no Canadian can fall. It's something whose time has come.

● (1725)

This crisis has shown us that there are a lot of issues we need to deal with. One of the things it has taught us is that life is more important than money, and when we work together we can get things done. I look forward to continuing to improve the programs the government has put forward.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Good day and good evening to you all.

Our next meeting will be at noon tomorrow.

The meeting is adjourned.

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