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Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic

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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 this meeting to order.

Welcome to the 11th meeting of the House of Commons Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic.

[*English*]

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, please activate your mike, and when you're not speaking, please make sure that your mike is off and it's muted.

[*Translation*]

I would like to remind the honourable members that if they wish to speak in English, they should choose the English channel, and if they wish to speak in French, they should choose the French channel.

[*English*]

Hon. Bernadette Jordan (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard): Mr. Chair, we're not getting the interpretation.

The Chair: We're not getting the interpretation.

[*Translation*]

Can you hear the interpretation now?

[*English*]

No interpretation is happening. We have a technical issue. I'm looking to our technical people.

[*Translation*]

I am going to read the instructions in both languages while waiting for them to sort out the interpretation problem.

I would like to remind the honourable members that if they wish to speak in English, they should choose the English channel, and if they wish to speak in French, they should choose the French channel. If you plan to speak in both languages, you should switch back and forth between the interpretation channels as required .

[*English*]

Each time you switch languages, please make sure that you switch back and forth. It's not an easy thing to do. I'd like to say that it becomes a habit, but it's still a struggle to go through.

[*Translation*]

Furthermore, to facilitate the interpreters' work, I would ask members to address their remarks to the chair, and to speak slowly and clearly at all times.

[*English*]

Yesterday we had some people who were trying to get as much as they could in. I know that some of us have a habit of speaking quickly. Just keep it down out of consideration not only for our members but also for our interpreters.

[*Translation*]

We also strongly recommend that those who will be speaking wear a headset. Once again, it's very important not only for your online colleagues, but also for the interpreters, to make it easier for them to understand what is being said. The clearer the comments, the better they can perform their task.

Before beginning, I will check to see whether the technical problem with interpretation has been settled. Apparently not.

[*English*]

We're going to suspend for a couple of minutes until we can resolve the interpretation problem.

[*Translation*]

It should be working again within a few minutes.

[*English*]

Stand by and we'll start in a couple of minutes.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: We're going to resume the sitting.

I understand that there are no ministerial announcements today, so we'll go right into presenting petitions for a period not exceeding 15 minutes. I want to remind members that any petition presented during the meeting of the special committee must have already been certified by the clerk of petitions.

The first petition will be presented by Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Mr. Chair, it's a huge honour today to table this petition on behalf of constituents from Courtenay—Alberni. They're calling on the government to support Motion M-1, which is the motion tabled by my colleague from New Westminster—Burnaby. It's calling for the government to make a Canada-made new deal, the first initiative before the House of Commons, which calls on the government to take bold and rapid action to adopt socially equitable climate action to tackle the climate emergency and address worsening socio-economic and racial inequalities while, at the same time, ending fossil fuel subsidies, closing offshore tax havens, supporting workers impacted by the transition and creating well-paid unionized jobs in the shift to a clean and renewable energy economy.

They are tabling this petition because they're deeply concerned that climate change has escalated into a global climate emergency and the world is on pace to warm nearly 4°C by 2100. Extreme weather events are now growing with increasing impacts, including floods, forest fires, rising temperatures, killer heat-waves, massive storms, sea level rise and disruption to marine and land ecosystems. They are citing that the timing of tabling this petition is important. Post-COVID, they're looking for a new normal that can address these very important issues and help move us forward in a progressive way and help support future generations.

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

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Chair, it's an honour to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Saanich—Gulf Islands. Of course, this petition has taken some time to reach the virtual floor of our Parliament, given the pandemic.

The petitioners are calling on the Government of Canada and the House of Commons to uphold the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's calls to action in relation to UN-DRIP. They call for the immediate halting of all existing and planned construction of Coastal GasLink projects on Wet'suwet'en territory. They also call for the scheduling of nation-to-nation talks, which we can acknowledge has commenced, but they also further call on prioritizing the real implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Chair, it's an honour to present petition e-2303, which has been certified by the clerk of petitions. The petition was started by my colleague, Alberta MLA Jeremy Nixon, and is signed by 16,636 Canadians from every corner of our country.

The petition recognizes that the government has refused to acknowledge the unfairness of the equalization program. It also recognizes the Liberal government's hostile and bourgeois approach to the workers in my riding. I share the anger of the petitioners who have signed this petition. The petition seeks to rectify this by calling upon the government to allow the Province of Alberta to take any and all measures deemed necessary to further its rightful autonomy and advance the interests of all Albertans.

• (1210)

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

The first question goes to Mr. Jeneroux.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux (Edmonton Riverbend, CPC): Mr. Chair, the chief public health officer of Canada testified at our health committee this week that she waited too long to close the borders. Would the Deputy Prime Minister agree with her?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs): Mr. Chair, Canada currently has restrictive border measures in place. One of the aspects of our border measures that I think is most valuable to Canadians—

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

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Mr. Chair, I would remind the member that on December 31, 2019, a Canadian company, BlueDot, first discovered evidence of the coronavirus spread. Also, in early January, the Public Health Agency was made aware of the potential spread to Canada, but it wasn't until March 16, after many calls from all opposition parties, I might add, that the government implemented travel bans.

Again, would the Deputy Prime Minister agree that her government waited too long to close the borders?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, let me continue my answer.

One of the most important and trickiest aspects of our travel restrictions has been to ensure that we have restrictions in place with our largest neighbour, most important trading partner, the United States, restrictions which simultaneously protect the health of Canadians but also permit essential travel for businesses, for services. That was a complex balance to achieve. I'm very pleased that we have achieved it.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Mr. Chair, after all this evidence, now in hindsight, would the Deputy Prime Minister agree with me that the Public Health Agency of Canada and, specifically, the Minister of Health, lacked the urgency to effectively contain the spread of COVID-19 like in other countries?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, as I said, getting the balance exactly right, particularly with the United States, with whom we have the longest unmilitarized border in the world and with whom we have essential trade that needs to continue, was very tricky. I'm very pleased that we've managed to do that in a reciprocal and collaborative way.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Mr. Chair, my question is for the Deputy Prime Minister. Is Canada currently facing or at risk of drug shortages due to COVID-19?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, we are very closely monitoring the need for various medicines in Canada.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Mr. Chair, can the Deputy Prime Minister confirm that approval of some drugs, including life-saving drugs, has not been sought here in Canada due to the uncertainty of the PMPRB drug regulatory changes?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, absolutely not. I would strongly disagree with that assertion. Of course, not every drug that is invented in the world has a manufacturer that seeks approval in Canada, but we always look for ways for Canadians to have access to the medicines they need.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Mr. Chair, has the Deputy Prime Minister heard that the PMPRB regulatory changes could lead to drug shortages?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, let me be very, very clear with Canadians. It is absolutely important for Canadians to have access to the medicines that they need. That is something that our government, working closely with the provinces, is focused on.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Mr. Chair, will the Deputy Prime Minister delay the PMPRB regulatory changes that come into effect on July 1?

• (1215)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, our government is focused on making the medicines that Canadians need available to them at an affordable price.

The Chair: Mr. Jeneroux, you have 50 seconds left.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Mr. Chair, the health minister has dragged her feet on this, and patients are looking for certainty. Again, will the Deputy Prime Minister step in and delay the PMPRB regulatory changes that are set to come into force on July 1?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, let me first of all say that our health minister is doing a fantastic job. She, like the rest of our government, is focused on ensuring that all Canadians have access to the medicines they need and that our country doesn't pay more than it needs to for the medicines it needs.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We'll begin with Mr. Therrien.

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Mr. Chair, on April 29 the government established the CESB, the Canada emergency student benefit, to provide financial assistance to students who may be experiencing problems finding a job under the circumstances we are all aware of. This goal has been achieved.

However, it is important to make sure that this CESB does not prevent students from entering the workforce. It should not deter them from working. In other words, it is essential that every student's income should always increase for each additional hour they work.

My question is a simple one: does the current CESB provide for additional student income for hours that they work, in every instance?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I would like to thank the member for his question.

I would like to emphasize that in my view, as a mother and a member of Parliament, the most important thing is to protect our young people and students. We must all understand that the crisis raises a particular problem for them and that it is a very dangerous time for them and their future. For this reason, I am proud to be able to say that our government has created a \$9-billion support program for our students.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I have not had an answer to my question. I will state it again because I am in a good mood. My question is: does the current CESB provide for additional student income for hours that they work, in every instance?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for his question.

I would like to reply by saying that for our government—and for the Bloc Québécois member, I believe—the priority must be to protect our students.

Mr. Alain Therrien: And yet it's a simple question. Will every single student who works more hours earn more income as a result?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: The answer is simple too.

We will do everything required to protect and help our young people because we understand that the situation is difficult, and even dangerous, because of the COVID-19 crisis.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I will ask the question another way.

A student who works two days a week will have exactly the same income as a student who works five days a week. Does the Deputy Prime Minister find this logical?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: It may be because I am a mother and have many young Canadians in my personal life, but I have an enormous amount of confidence in our young people. I believe that they want to work.

Mr. Alain Therrien: The answer is simple. A student works two days a week; that's a fact. I am not a mother, but I am a father, and I can understand that.

I will now ask a very simple question. You agreed with the Bloc Québécois: on April 29, you agreed in the House that it was necessary to introduce work incentives. What has happened since then? You gave your word to the Bloc Québécois. What is the outcome? What have you done over the past three weeks?

The Chair: I remind the members to address their questions to the chair.

Please continue, Ms. Freeland.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I am well aware that the Bloc Québécois member is not a mother. Fathers also think that students and young people are important.

I have two things to say. First of all, our government recognizes the close cooperation that exists among all members of the opposition, including members of the Bloc Québécois. We are always prepared to speak and work with them. Secondly, I am personally convinced that our young people want to work. They want to gain employment experience because they understand that it is important for their careers.

• (1220)

Mr. Alain Therrien: I know the answer: The Liberals have done nothing. They promised on April 29 that they would offer incentives because they felt we were right. However, they did nothing.

How can we trust a government that gives its word but then fails to follow up on it after three weeks?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I hope and believe that Canadians and Quebecers have a high level of confidence in our government. I hope that they know we understand that we have to deal with a crisis that is a major challenge. We are prepared to do everything needed to protect the health of Canadians and our country's economy.

[English]

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

[Translation]

Mr. Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for the government. We believe that all public funds should go to workers and not to companies that are cheating the system.

Is the government prepared to make changes to its program to ensure that no public funds are given to companies that cheat the system?

The Chair: The honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Thank you Mr. Chair

I agree with the leader of the NDP that the priority is to help workers. We must help Canadians because our country is facing a major economic crisis. We believe that it is important to find ways to give money to people.

[English]

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, my question is very clear. Money should go to workers, not to companies that cheat the system, not to companies that have their money hidden in offshore tax havens.

Will the government fix its program, fix its plan, so that it is not sending money to companies that cheat the system, and will it send money to workers and support those who need it?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I agree with the member opposite that our priority needs to be to support Canadian workers in this very difficult time.

What I would say to the member opposite, as the Prime Minister said earlier this week, please name one company that is receiving the wage subsidy support and therefore is able to keep its workers on the payroll who you think should not be getting that support. We'd like to know. We don't want anybody to be cheating either.

The Chair: Before we continue, I just want to remind members both asking and answering questions to place their answers and questions through the chair, not directly to the person.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I'm sorry.

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

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, it is ludicrous to suggest the government is not aware of the countless companies that are registered in offshore tax havens. We have the Panama papers. Every company that's listed in the Panama papers.... For example, recently your own CRA went after Loblaws because Loblaws put money in an offshore tax haven which was found to be legal. Your system has been designed in such a way that companies can put their money in an offshore tax haven and cheat the public.

I'm saying, do what France has done. Do what Germany has done. Do what so many countries have done. Don't give help to a company that is registered in an offshore tax haven. Loblaws and Cargill are two examples.

You're the government; you can figure that out.

The Chair: I'm the chair, not the government. I just want to point that out and remind honourable members to place their questions through me, not to me.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

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

While I'm not sure if the member opposite is suggesting that Loblaws and Cargill are in receipt of wage subsidy support, and if he is, I'd like to hear that, but more broadly, I do want to be clear about our government's position, which I'm very proud of. Our government's position is that our house is burning down, and Canadians right now are facing the toughest economic situation since the Great Depression, and our priority is to support every single Canadian worker we can.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Through you, Mr. Chair, the government is making it really clear what their position is. Their minister went on TV saying that CEOs could receive a million dollars in bonuses with public money. Is that your government's position? Will you adopt Germany's position and ensure that no CEO receives any amount of public money for their bonuses and that all money goes to workers? Will you commit to that?

• (1225)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Well, look, when it comes to bonuses, I don't think the member opposite is proposing that our government should put in place across-the-board restrictions on—

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Yes, I am.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: —on the salaries of all CEOs across the country no matter what. That would be rather draconian.

When it comes to our LEEFF program of support for large employers, it is absolutely the case that any company that seeks that support will have to agree to very strict —

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

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: —restrictions on executive pay, share buybacks and dividends.

The Chair: —on a 15-second question, hopefully.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, will the government commit to not sending public money to CEOs, which is what they're doing right now, and ensure that all money goes to workers? Will they end this idea that a CEO can get a million-dollar bonus and receive help?

Germany has said that there should be no bonuses for CEOs who are seeking to get help from the public. Will you commit to that? Will the government commit to that?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, let me commit to two things.

First of all, our priority absolutely is to support workers. That's what we're doing.

Second of all, companies getting support through the LEEFF program absolutely will face restrictions on dividends, share buy-backs and executive compensation.

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

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Mr. Chair, Prime Minister Trudeau is having a waterfront mansion built at Harrington Lake at taxpayers' expense. This is a multimillion dollar temporary lodging while the other taxpayer-funded mansion at Harrington Lake is upgraded. How many taxpayer-funded houses in the national capital region does the Prime Minister need? We have 24 Sussex, Rideau Cottage, Harrington Lake, the pre-existing guest cottage at Harrington Lake and now an additional cottage.

Canadians are struggling to pay the bills. How much are they paying for this secret mansion?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Mr. Chair, I would like to raise a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Rodriguez.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, once again, although I would like to be creative and very open, I do not understand how this question is related to what was decided by the House of Commons—not the government—by means of a motion. The motion was to the effect that the committee should meet to debate matters pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. The question is entirely unrelated to the subject under discussion.

[*English*]

The Chair: The question of relevance is one that has come up a few times in previous meetings. I would remind honourable members that the mandate given to this committee by the House stated that the questions of ministers of the Crown were to be in respect to the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted previously, however, I've seen several instances where questions have been posed to ministers on other topics, and ministers have responded to these questions.

That said, the committee's mandate is clear. Questions and answers should be related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and I would invite all members to ensure that their interventions are consistent with that mandate.

We'll go back to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, how much are Canadians on the hook for with this mansion?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Is there a minister who wants to answer that?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I think that my colleague should abide by the House of Commons decision, namely that the committee should meet to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are going through an unprecedented and historic period, during which we need to be there to help Canadians. We need to be able to debate and we are prepared to answer all questions from the opposition. We are happy to do so. There are also seven question periods each week, but this question has absolutely nothing to do with the pandemic.

The Chair: We will now continue—

[*English*]

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Mr. Chair, if I may—

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I believe, Mr. Chair, when the House of Commons resumed the first time after suspension, the motion passed gave the government unprecedented spending powers in light of the COVID-19 crisis. Ostensibly this would be the forum in which to question those powers that were given as part of the COVID-19 crisis, so one would think that questioning a major renovation done to the Prime Minister's house during this period under those spending powers would be a relevant question.

● (1230)

Mr. Michael Barrett: I agree.

The Chair: I will let the minister who is answering that question answer when the time comes, but my parameters are to make sure that everything is within the parameters given to this committee, and—

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair—

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Barrett, we'll let you—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, is your ruling that my question cannot be asked?

The Chair: It can be asked. Whether it is answered or not is another story.

Mr. Barrett, do you have a question?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes, Mr. Chair. My question is, how much are Canadians paying for renovations to mansions for the Prime Minister while they cannot pay their bills?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Rodriguez.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, once again on the point of order. If I may, I would like to read the April 20 motion. It is very specific. It was read and passed in the House:

- (h) a special committee on the COVID-19 pandemic shall be established, composed of all members of the House, and which shall meet for the purposes of
 - (i) considering ministerial announcements,
 - (ii) allowing members to present petitions,
 - (iii) questioning ministers of the Crown, including the Prime Minister, in respect of the COVID-19 pandemic—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. Barrett, do you have a question?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, are you going to rule on his point of order?

The Chair: The point of order is that we do have restrictions within this committee and our parameters—

An hon. member: On a point of order.

The Chair: Please don't interrupt the chair while he is speaking, whoever brought that up. We'll come to you in a moment.

Mr. Barrett, I will come to your point that we do have parameters with this committee. We do have limitations, and I ask the members to respect those limitations.

Now somebody brought up a point of order. Who was it?

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Mr. Chair, the point of order was that we couldn't hear the beginning of your statement.

My apologies.

The Chair: Okay, sorry about that.

Basically what I was saying was that the committee does have set parameters as stated by the House, and we are required to stay within those parameters.

Now, Mr. Barrett, do you have a question?

Mr. Michael Barrett: My question is for the government. How much are Canadians to pay for the construction and renovation of secret mansions for the Prime Minister?

Ms. Elizabeth May: On a point of order, and no offence to Mr. Barrett, but the use of “secret mansions” and so on, the tone of the question, if I could offer my friend some advice, isn't helping him.

We might be able to say that the Harrington Lake cottage—

Mr. Michael Barrett: That's debate.

Mr. Dan Albas (Central Okanagan—Similkameen—Nicola, CPC): That's debate.

Ms. Elizabeth May: No, excuse me, I'd like to make a point of order.

The Harrington Lake cottage has relevance to the pandemic in that the Prime Minister and his family sheltered there and therefore that made the Harrington Lake cottage connected to COVID-19 sufficiently that an argument could be made, respectfully, that the government should answer the question, but the language the hon.

member is using is prejudicial and makes the question appear less relevant.

Mr. Michael Barrett: On that point of order, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: That is debate as far as I'm concerned.

Mr. Michael Barrett: On that point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Barrett, very good. Go ahead.

Mr. Michael Barrett: On that point of order, Mr. Chair, it's not my assertion that it is a secret. The Globe and Mail reported that the NCC first said, “There are no new buildings being constructed” but then later the NCC confirmed that they were in fact constructing and renovating buildings. That is the secret, and that's the nature of the question.

I don't need coaching from Ms. May or other members. I need answers from the government for Canadians when it is spending tens of millions of dollars.

The Chair: We'll put the question out there and see what comes back.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, my comment pertains to the same point of order.

There is currently a worldwide pandemic in progress. Members of the House agreed that we should meet in committee to debate issues pertaining to the pandemic. It's extremely important.

I assume that my colleague and members of his party have some questions to ask about the pandemic. We are prepared to listen to them and answer their questions. However, we must comply with House orders.

[*English*]

The Chair: As far as I'm concerned, that's the answer that—

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): I have a response to that point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Steinley.

• (1235)

Mr. Warren Steinley: The Deputy Prime Minister just said that this is the biggest financial crisis facing Canadians since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Spending taxpayer dollars on renovations to a home while Canadians can't pay their bills is, with all due respect to the government House leader, part of the COVID response. That money could be spent elsewhere to help Canadians. I don't understand how the honourable government House leader does not see this as a valid question, as it is really about the priorities of the government.

The Chair: The debate seems to be more about the question itself and whether it's relevant. I've made a statement. The answer that came from the government House leader seems to be the answer to the question, and the back and forth is not really solving much.

At this point, I believe we've run out of time for Mr. Barrett.

We'll go to Ms. Rempel.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Those interventions were for points of order. I don't think the Standing Orders or the orders for this committee tell us that points of order are deducted from a member's speaking time.

The Chair: They were not deducted. What happened is the response that came from the government House leader was an answer.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I have a point of order, sir.

The Chair: What came back in his point of order was an answer to your question as well, but no, it's—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, he prefaced it with “point of order” each time and you recognized him.

The Chair: You're absolutely right. I take that back, in all fairness. I'll give you another question, if you'd like. You have one minute and 30 seconds left.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, during this pandemic, Canadians are having an increasingly hard time paying their bills. Businesses are failing. All the while, the government is continuing to construct mansions for the Prime Minister's enjoyment, and it is obscuring and obstructing information from the public.

How much is this costing taxpayers?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, I would be very grateful if my colleague could spend some time asking questions about the pandemic that is affecting not only Canada—

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'd love for you to answer a question, Pablo.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: —but the whole world.

I believe that my colleague could concentrate on the pandemic, in which case we would be pleased to answer his questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: I want to remind honourable members not to interrupt each other and to speak through the chair, not to the person who asked the question nor to the person who is responding.

Mr. Barrett, you have 38 seconds.

Mr. Damien Kurek: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Sorry, Mr. Chair, but once again I was unable to hear the first 20 seconds or so of your statement.

The Chair: I apologize. We've been having trouble with interpretation today. I don't know if you heard the beginning of that.

We'll go to Mr. Barrett now for the question.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, why is it that after the initial inquiry was made to the government about the construction of the secret mansion, they initially replied that it was not true but then, once they were caught, they confirmed that the information was true?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, rather than becoming mired in things like conspiracy theories, state secrets, and hidden agendas, I would ask my colleague to debate matters that pertain to the pandemic, because that is what the House of Commons decided we should be doing.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll now go to Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Mr. Chair, it's been suggested that Canada's government has been providing advice to Canadians based, at least in part, upon appeasing the WHO and, in turn, the Government of China. Would this be an accurate characterization?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: This would absolutely not be an accurate characterization.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: That leads into my next line of questions very well.

How many lost Canadian lives and jobs can be attributed to the government believing the statement made by the WHO in January that here's no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus?

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health): Mr. Chair, as the member knows, this is a global pandemic. The World Health Organization has played an important role in helping convene scientists and researchers from around the world to understand the science as it evolves around this novel coronavirus—

• (1240)

The Chair: We'll go back to Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: How many lost lives and Canadian jobs can be attributed to Dr. Tam's stating in January, “It's going to be rare”?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As the member knows, we have been monitoring the coronavirus since we first found out about a cluster of unusual cases in Wuhan in December. At every step of the way, we've been transparent with Canadians about the risks to their health and safety—

The Chair: We will go back to Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: How many lost Canadian lives and jobs can be attributed to the minister's opinion that “border measures are highly ineffective” in March or that border measures don't work at all?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: In fact, we've had measures at the border since the beginning of—

A voice: I think we're done for now. Is that...?

The Chair: I'm sorry. There was an interruption there. Somebody had their mute off.

The honourable minister may continue.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you.

As I was saying, Mr. Chair, to allege that there have been no border measures is actually untrue and misleading to Canadians. In fact, we've been screening arrivals at international borders for quite some time, as the member knows.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I simply quoted what the minister said, so I think she just said that she was misleading Canadians.

How many Canadian lives and jobs that were lost can be attributed to the statement from the minister that the risk is extremely low for Canadians and there is no need for Canadians to be alarmed?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As the member knows, the risk assessment that we were providing to Canadians at every step of the way was posed on the actual risk to Canadians at that time. As the risk to Canadians changed, of course so did our assessment and so did our advice.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Does the minister consider the statement “If we all stopped moving for two weeks...we would see this virus die” to be COVID misinformation?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: We know that one of the ways the virus is transmitted is through people having close contact with others. I would argue that there is still quite a bit of work to do to remind Canadians that as we loosen our economy, we need to continue to physically distance.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: When the minister stated, “It’s unfortunate that misinformation is creating a perception for Canadians that belies reality” at a press conference, was she referring to the advice coming from her, the Prime Minister and Dr. Tam?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The effects of the pandemic have had significant impacts on different groups of people in different ways. I recall that particular conversation, in fact. I was talking about the particular effects on the Chinese-Canadian community, which was suffering from a high degree of racism—

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, go ahead.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Given the literal failure of the government, the fatal failure of the government, to provide timely, sound advice to Canadians on COVID-19, would it be fair to say that Canadians should think twice before blindly placing their trust in this government when it comes to measures that take away their civil liberties, safety and livelihoods?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, it’s an interesting line of questioning that the member is pursuing. In fact, what’s kept Canadians safe is Canadians listening to the advice of public health officials across the country, who have been advising them every step of the way on how to protect themselves and their families.

I want to thank Canadians for the extreme work they’ve been doing to prevent overwhelming our health care system, which we’ve seen in so many other jurisdictions—

The Chair: We go back to Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Does the minister support an unimpeded, full, independent, global investigation into the origins of the coronavirus?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As the Prime Minister and I and many others from this government have stated, there is an imperative that we have a review not only of the international response to the outbreak of COVID-19 but also our own country’s response. It will be a very important way for future generations to learn how to combat global disease.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Is the minister—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Over to you, Mr. Martel, for the next question.

Mr. Richard Martel (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, CPC): Good afternoon.

Mr. Chair, many Canadian citizens who had been abroad were repatriated because of COVID-19. However, some are still stuck there. That is the situation for a citizen of Chicoutimi, Mr. André Gauthier, who is currently being held in a prison in Dubai for a crime that he has clearly not committed. There is no reason for this matter to drag on. At the moment, the virus is spreading quickly in the prison where he is being detained, which is dangerous to his health and safety. The Canadian government is his only hope.

I would like to know when the Minister of Foreign Affairs is going to demand the repatriation of our Canadian citizen.

● (1245)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I would like to thank my colleague very much for his question.

When I was Minister of Foreign affairs, I worked closely with the Gauthier family. Mr. Martel is right to say that this matter is of considerable concern to our government, and to all Canadians, particularly in Mr. Gauthier’s region. We are going to continue to work with the family and our foreign partners to help Mr. Gauthier.

Mr. Richard Martel: Mr. Chair, some startup companies that are only beginning to grow are not eligible for government assistance. As we know, startup companies do not have comparable figures that would enable them to determine whether they have lost 30% of their revenue, for example, compared to the previous year. These startup companies have made investments and signed contracts with other employers. However, banks are twitchy at the moment and hesitant to lend them money.

What is the government going to do to help these startups?

Hon. Bill Morneau (Minister of Finance): Mr. Chair, many companies are experiencing problems. That is why, whenever we have to deal with a challenge, we look into improvements and changes that might be made to our programs. In such changeable circumstances, it is very important to do so.

If the member has a specific example he would like to mention, he could tell me about it, and then we might be able to look into it further.

Mr. Richard Martel: Mr. Chair, some entrepreneurs do not have a business checking account; they only have a personal checking account. That’s why they do not have access to the Canada emergency business account, even though they meet all the other criteria. Before considering any expansion of this program, it’s important to make sure that all of our family businesses have access to it.

If entrepreneurs were to open a business account now and their personal checking account did not show any payment defaults, would the government be open to the idea of making them eligible to apply?

[English]

Hon. Mary Ng (Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade): As the Prime Minister has said personally, we are working very hard on a solution for the companies and entrepreneurs with personal accounts. We're going to ensure that we support these very hard-working businesses and entrepreneurs in our country.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: Mr. Chair, the economic recovery plan will be key for Canada. The government is well aware of the fact that there are ways other than increasing taxes to pay down the debt. Private sector natural resource projects in Canada represent over \$200 billion. There is a major project called GNL Québec in my own riding.

When is the government planning to restart and speed up the environmental assessment process, specifically to create wealth in the country?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I would like to thank my colleague for his question.

We are very familiar with this project and are working on several issues, including this one, in close collaboration with Quebec. I, like the member, believe that natural resource projects are important for Canada's economy and that they will also be important for helping our economy recover.

[English]

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

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, Joe Biden's position on Keystone today became a lot clearer this morning when it was reported that a former adviser to the Prime Minister, Jen O'Malley Dillon, is now consulting for this presidential candidate. We know that the Prime Minister allowed a former U.S. president to intervene in the last election, testing his own foreign interference legislation, and Canadians continue to wait for him and his government to take a tougher stand on China.

When will the Prime Minister stand up for Canada and our interests as we rebuild? Or will he continue to covertly use the influence of foreign entities to destroy us and our economy?

● (1250)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I must say that I disagree in the strongest possible terms that our government would ever encourage foreign influence in Canadian democracy, and I have to say that I believe all members of this House have the same view.

Our democracy is precious. Our sovereignty is precious. I think all of us as members of this House are sworn to defend it, and our government certainly has always done that and will continue to do so.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Mr. Chair, I am very concerned for the economic future of Canada. I see the United States going ahead with their economic prosperity network. I have yet to see anything from our government regarding new supply chains.

Mr. Chair, The Pipeline reports that 61 environmentalists now fill senior positions in this Prime Minister's administration. While all perspectives are needed, he continues to ignore the reason for and the necessity of including industry and economy.

When will the Prime Minister work towards achieving a balance in the administration, or will he continue to allow his own ideology to hurt the economy and eliminate industry at a time when we so desperately need it to rebuild Canada?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, if the member opposite is suggesting that people who believe we need to protect our environment and people who believe we need to fight climate change work in our government, then the member is absolutely right, and I believe that all Canadians understand that we need to fight climate change and we need to support the environment.

Canada, as a proud natural resource producing country, needs to continue the work that is led by many brilliant people in the energy sector to produce our natural resources in a sustainable way to protect our environment. That is something we're doing, and it is something we'll continue to do.

The Chair: We'll now go back to Ms. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Prime Minister says that, but this federal Liberal government has shown again and again that they don't care for the Canadian energy sector or jobs in western Canada. They introduced anti-energy legislation through Bill C-69 and Bill C-48, as all Canadians know, which have devastated the industry. In fact, these two bills alone forced over \$200 billion of investment to leave Canada.

To add to Alberta's economic problems, we've also had an international oil price war and the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a huge drop in the demand for oil. Economies across the country are starting to open up again, but the reality for many Albertans in my riding is that they don't have a job to go back to.

When will the government start supporting Canadian energy workers and remove the regulatory roadblocks that they keep putting up?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, our government absolutely understands the need to support workers across our fantastic country, very much including energy workers, and we understand that energy workers are facing a double burden. They are facing the challenges posed by the coronavirus, and they are facing the challenges posed by a historically low price for oil.

That is why our government has stepped up to help them. We have stepped up to help them with the \$1.7 billion to clean up orphaned wells, an effort that will put people back to work while supporting our environment. The LEEFF program, which is now open for applications, is going to support large employers across the country, very much including in our energy sector.

I'd like to congratulate the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and B.C. for working with the federal government to agree on methane emissions. This is very good news for the environment. It's very good news for our energy sector. We are making progress together.

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

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Over a month ago, the Prime Minister came out of his cottage and told Canadians that there would be a program announced specific to tourism and hospitality.

Can the minister for tourism tell us when that program will be announced?

• (1255)

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages): The tourism sector is of course deeply impacted, and that's why we have the rent support, the wage subsidy and also the CEBA account and the regional development agency funding.

Mr. Blake Richards: The minister is skating around the question here. The Prime Minister said there would be a program specifically announced for tourism and hospitality. That was over a month ago.

When will that program be announced? I don't want to hear about other programs that exist. I want to hear about the one that's supposed to be coming for tourism and hospitality specifically.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Well, there is a program directly for tourism operators, and my colleague knows about it because we had good conversations about it. It is to pay the rents, pay the employee salaries, and also to have access to liquidity. These are the measures that are there for the tourism sector.

Mr. Blake Richards: Clearly, the answer to that question is that this program is not going to be coming. The Prime Minister was apparently misleading Canadians.

Let's ask about some other things that affect the tourism industry and its ability to reopen when the economy restarts.

When the government makes the decision, whenever that is, to reopen the international borders, tourism operators will certainly need some lead time to make things like marketing campaigns, staffing decisions and put in place safety protocols. When is the government going to set out some kind of criteria or parameters around how those decisions will be made about border reopening so there's some certainty for tourism operators and they can ramp up their businesses again?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: My colleague, the Minister of Public Safety, and I are in close contact and close co-operation. We understand that we need to make sure we respect the public health authorities' advice, while at the same time supporting the reopening of the economy. Certainly tourism has been hard hit, so that's why we have in place measures until the end of August through the wage subsidy.

However, if businesses are really falling through the cracks of the system, they can have access to the regional development agen-

cy funding, and of course we're looking at supporting destination marketing organizations as well.

Mr. Blake Richards: What businesses want, though, is to be able to ramp up their businesses and get back into business. To be able to do that, they need to have some sense of when this will happen. You can't just reopen the borders and expect visitors are going to flow across again tomorrow.

They need to know when this will happen, in terms of how the criteria are developed. Will the government be announcing what those criteria will look like so that businesses can have some certainty and some idea of when they will be able to welcome visitors again and prepare to make sure things are safe when they do so?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, let me thank the member opposite for the question. It's a very important one for Canadians, and I want to start with this assurance to Canadians: The health and safety of Canadians is first and foremost for our government when it comes to reopening the borders. We need to be very careful about the epidemiological situation in Canada and outside our country. We're also working very closely with the premiers.

Mr. Blake Richards: Again it sounds like we're not going to get any kind of an answer there, so maybe we can talk about the fact that for many tourism operators, the whole vitally important summer tourist season is in serious jeopardy for them. With international visitation likely to be down for some time to come as well, what will the government do to promote more winter tourism in Canada and more domestic tourism this year?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Thank you to my colleague for his important question.

I understand the anxiety of people in the tourism sector expressed by my colleague today because it is a sector that is hard hit. We did some very important investments in the past mandate to make sure we would be supporting winter tourism, but we want to do more, and that's exactly why we're spending through our regional development agencies, and we will continue to engage with the tourism sector as we're trying to reopen and—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Richards for a question of 15 seconds or less, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: We're still not getting any answers on tourism, so let's try to get an answer on our important oil and gas industry.

Does the government agree with the leaders of the Bloc and the Green Party that oil is dead, thanks to their attempts to kill it?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, our government understands the importance of the energy sector to the Canadian economy, and we are committed to supporting energy workers.

Mr. Blake Richards: What is the government doing to support the industry if it—

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Lemire.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Chair, several weeks ago, the Bloc Québécois suggested to the government a subsidy program that would cover a major portion of fixed costs for SMEs and organizations. Our goal was to prevent our SMEs and organizations, when they resume their activities, from offsetting their revenue shortfalls through credit, which would mire them even deeper into the vicious circle of indebtedness.

Can the Minister of Finance tell us why an appropriate and effective program has not been put in place to truly cover the fixed costs of SMEs and organizations so they can avoid this vicious circle.

• (1300)

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for his question.

We know that the situation is very difficult for SMEs and that it is essential to take their fixed costs into consideration. That is why we have launched several programs. We began with the loans program for small and medium-sized businesses, which eliminates a portion of the loan. There is also the very important Canada emergency commercial rent assistance program.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Mr. Chair, it has become fairly obvious that the government has not done enough with respect to the fixed costs of SMEs and organizations and that businesses of all kinds are now being forced to consider terminating or substantially reducing their activities.

Is the government prepared to reimburse a significant share of these fixed costs through a genuine, concrete and effective—and I hope universal as well—50% refundable tax credit for eligible fixed costs for small businesses, business owners who draw dividends, and partnerships?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, it is of course very important to address the challenges facing SMEs. These challenges will clearly be serious, at least for the coming months. That is why we have launched several programs, which we will improve if problems persist. For example, we extended the eligibility criteria for our Small and medium-sized enterprise loan and guarantee program to ensure that as many businesses as possible could apply. We will continue to look into improvements—

The Chair: Back to Mr. Lemire.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Mr. Chair, in fact, the statistics show that the Canada emergency commercial rent assistance program is not effective. Many SMEs and organizations are ineligible. And according to the latest survey conducted by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 51% of owners do not use the program because they have to pay 25% of the rent. It is only to be expected that some should refuse to apply for this program to avoid having to provide a portion of the support.

Will the minister ever get around to listening to tenants and owners, and make the program more flexible? Since he is speaking about modernizing programs, would not the option of providing assistance directly to tenants have been fairer and more effective?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I know that the Canada emergency commercial rent assistance program raises several questions. The criteria were explained yesterday. We know that it's always important to listen to what people have to say. It's essential for every-

one to cooperate in searching for solutions. We will of course continue to work with the provinces because this matter falls under their jurisdiction. Our program is clearly going to improve the situation for many companies and we will continue with—

The Chair: Mr. Lemire.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Mr. Chair, once again I would like to ask if we can expect to see a refundable tax credit for eligible fixed costs to help our SMEs avoid the vicious circle of debt?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we know that there are various interesting possibilities. For the time being, we have taken several steps to improve the situation of SMEs and we—

The Chair: Back to Mr. Lemire.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Mr. Chair, I spoke with the Community futures development corporations—CFDCs—in my region. These CFDCs were unanimous in saying that the July 15 deadline for submitting projects to the Regional relief and recovery fund is too early.

For a direct recovery, could the government agree to postpone the July 15 date to September 30, for example, to give the RRRFs enough time to do their work and for entrepreneurs to be able to benefit from their acknowledged expertise?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Chair, I would like to thank my colleague. I know that he is very keen on the CFDCs, as I am. They have just received the biggest budget in their history, with a \$70 million boost. At the moment, the objective is to get them in place quickly. If my colleague has any suggestions, I would be happy to discuss them with him.

[English]

The Chair: We'll now go on to Ms. Ratansi.

• (1305)

Mr. Damien Kurek: I have a point of order.

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

Mr. Damien Kurek: Sorry. Once again, before moving on to the next question, there was an issue with the interpretation. I was not able to understand the last 45 seconds. It was a volume issue again.

The Chair: Okay. We'll turn to our tech.

Is there anyone else on the line who is having the same issue? We have Ms. Vandenberg and Ms. Jansen with that problem. We'll probably have a technician contact you directly and see if we can figure that out.

Go ahead, Ms. Jordan.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Mr. Chair, I believe that Minister Joly was probably on the English channel but speaking French, and that's why she was just as loud as the interpretation.

The Chair: I see her nodding. Okay, we've solved the problem.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I was on the floor channel. I can repeat my reply to my colleague Mr. Lemire's question.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, please. You have about 20 seconds to answer the question again, and we'll go from there.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Chair, I would like to thank my colleague, who is very keen on the CFDCs, as I am. As they recently received a whopping \$70 million in funds we want to make sure that they can get the money as quickly as possible to our companies in the field. If my colleague has any suggestions, I would be happy to discuss them with him.

[*English*]

The Chair: Before going to Ms. Ratansi, I want to remind all honourable members that if you're switching from one language to another, make sure that the right button is on. I'm not lecturing. I'm telling you as someone who has actually done that a number of times, and I apologize in advance; I probably will be doing that again. Let's just try to pay attention, and we'll be fine.

Let's go to Ms. Ratansi.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I begin, I wish to inform you that I'll be sharing my time with the member for Beaches—East York.

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, our government has invested significantly in ensuring that all Canadians are looked after and that all sectors of the economy are looked after as well. Our government introduced the Canada emergency response benefit to look after those who lost their jobs, introduced a top-up to the Canada child benefit, increased payments to seniors and provided a one-time additional GST credit.

As well, to assist businesses to remain viable, our government introduced incentives for businesses to keep employees on their payroll, including the Canada emergency wage subsidy, the Canada emergency business account, the business credit availability program, Canada emergency commercial rent assistance, and investments in the oil and gas sector, the agriculture sector, innovators, start-ups, indigenous communities and many more. The investments continue to be made as the situation evolves.

Mr. Chair, through you to the Minister of Finance, can the minister advise how these programs are positioning the Canadian economy to start up after the pandemic? How does Canada fare in relation to G7 countries in its investments?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, first I'd like to thank the member for Don Valley East for her question.

We have and will continue to be unwavering in our support for families and for our economy. We know that we're all in this together and that our government needs to be prepared to use whatever means necessary to support Canadians and come out of this in a strong position.

We're also helping Canadian employers to protect jobs and pay their bills by providing programs that were mentioned by the member, such as the Canada emergency business account, offering a 75% wage subsidy to help keep employees on the payroll and helping businesses to pay their rent. All of these measures, we believe, will leave businesses and Canadians poised for a strong recovery.

We know that we entered into this crisis with a strong fiscal position, and we are willing and able as a country to respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19. We also know that this is a global challenge and that Canada, more so than any other country in the G7, is well positioned to respond based on our very strong balance sheet.

I'd like to thank you, Mr. Chair, and through you, thank the member for her question.

The Chair: The next question goes to Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.): I am thankful that our government continues to listen to Canadians and to adjust and improve support programs based on that feedback. In that vein, I trust that we will extend the CERB. I hope that we build it out on a negative income tax model.

Of course, we only face an economic crisis because we face a health crisis. We know that the answer to the health crisis is to test, trace, isolate and support, and yet for weeks now we've seen less than 50% of our national daily testing capacity of 60,000 tests is used, capacity that itself is insufficient and needs to be scaled up. While B.C. has managed to contain community spread, my province of Ontario has failed to test quickly, smartly or sufficiently. On tracing, Dr. Warner at my local Michael Garron Hospital has said that Ontario is "aspiring for mediocrity" and called these tracing efforts "inexcusable".

To the Minister of Health, what are the obstacles to improving testing and tracing efforts? How will our federal government lean in, show leadership and help overcome these obstacles?

● (1310)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I want to thank my colleague from Beaches—East York for an important question about testing and about testing strategy.

Last week we hit a milestone of sorts. Canada completed over a million tests of Canadians. Although this seems like a high number, there's more work to do. We have the capacity in Canada to date to be able to test 60,000 Canadians. We're reaching somewhere on the average of 27,000 or 28,000 tests a day right now.

The challenge is multiple. As we know, each jurisdiction has control over their own testing strategy. I will congratulate all provinces and territories for working really diligently to boost their capacity to do these tests, working in partnership with local public health units and working in partnership with the public health labs.

At the federal government, the work we're doing is to support that increased capacity by ensuring that access to labs and access to resources needed for testing, such as swabs and reagents, and access to the ability to increase capacity around data are not barriers. We continue that work with our colleagues. We know that testing strategies will vary from province to province, but we are very encouraged by the progress we're seeing to date.

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

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): This is my first time appearing before the COVID-19 special committee of the whole. I would like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to all the health care workers, front-line workers and essential workers across the country who serve so diligently and selflessly during the crisis.

I also wish to offer my condolences to the families and loved ones of the far too many Canadians who have lost their lives due to this disease. I offer a special tribute to Snowbird Captain Jennifer Casey and also the crew of the RCAF Cyclone helicopter crash.

Mr. Chair, the fiscal situation facing Newfoundland and Labrador is very bleak and getting worse as each day passes. Since 2008 we've been considered a "have" province and have received no equalization payments. This year our province is facing a deficit, however, of \$2 billion due to the loss of revenues and royalties due to COVID-19, while Nova Scotia and New Brunswick each received \$2 billion in equalization.

We were happy to contribute when we could do so, but now we need help. Will the Government of Canada adjust the equalization program or find another way to ensure that Newfoundland and Labrador is not unfairly burdened as a result of these circumstances?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I would like to thank the member for his question and for his kind words to all Canadians.

I assure him that we have been working together with the group at finance in Newfoundland and Labrador to understand the issues and challenges facing that province, which are significant. Certainly, what we've seen during the course of this pandemic are measures to be of significant support. Things like the top-up for essential workers have been important across the country, including in Newfoundland and Labrador. The Bank of Canada's decision to move forward and support provinces in the issuance of their provincial debt has been important for many provinces, and certainly of significant importance for Newfoundland and Labrador.

We continue to recognize that the programs we have—the stabilization program, for example—need to be looked at in the context of changing circumstances. We know it has been a decade since that program has been reviewed. Of course, there is a regular review of the equalization program every five years, and that review will take into account the considerations of Newfoundland and Labrador and other provinces to make sure that we come to a good conclusion.

Mr. Jack Harris: Madam Chair, that ate up a lot of my time, but it didn't answer the question about what we're going to do for the next five years, waiting for that change.

The fishing industry support plan, recently announced, provides a number of positive programs, including allowing fish harvesters to use last year's catch numbers to qualify for EI because of the anticipated shorter season this year due to COVID-19. However, fish plant workers were left out.

Will the minister for fisheries or finance announce today that fish plant workers can do the same and use last year's weeks to qualify for EI, if necessary, so that they will not go without income after the fishing season?

• (1315)

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: I want to thank the honourable member for his question.

We have put in place a number of measures to address concerns that we have heard from harvesters directly, including the extension of EI to make sure that they are able to qualify this year based on last season's earnings.

We continue to look at measures that can address the seasonal workers in fish plants as well as crew on boats to make sure that those concerns are addressed. We will work with the industry and with the people in the provinces to make sure that we are addressing all of these concerns as we go forward, and I look forward to having more to say about that.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP)): Before I recognize you, Mr. Harris, could you either bring your mike closer to your mouth or closer to the computer, one or the other? We're having a hard time hearing you.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

That's essential to look at it, but what we want to know is if you will do the same thing for fish plant workers as you're doing for fish harvesters.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I remind the member to address the question to the chair.

The honourable minister can reply.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Madam Chair, we have said all along that no Canadian will be left behind. We are continuing to work with the industry to make sure that we address concerns as we go forward.

Mr. Jack Harris: Madam Chair, we know that indigenous Canadians are overrepresented in our federal prisons and that a far higher percentage of them are also serving their sentence in prison rather than in the community, thereby suffering a greater chance of infection from COVID-19.

Why then has the Parole Board cancelled or indefinitely postponed parole hearings for indigenous inmates who wish the assistance of an elder in support of their case, which is the choice of some 40% of indigenous inmates seeking release on parole? Does the government not recognize this as a discriminatory practice?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Although the time is up, I'll allow for an answer from the minister.

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): I want to assure the member that we do understand the importance of the presence of elders at those parole hearings. Unfortunately, during the COVID pandemic, steps have been necessary to protect the health and safety of the people participating in those entire processes, but we are working very hard to ensure that elder participation can occur virtually until at such time as we are able to do it in person.

We do recognize it's important, so I thank him for a very important question.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will go to the honourable member for Abbotsford, Mr. Fast.

Hon. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Madam Chair, the COVID pandemic has left many Canadian companies vastly undervalued and therefore vulnerable to foreign takeovers by hostile regimes. Such takeovers represent significant risks not only to our national sovereignty but also to our national security. Even NATO and the European Union have recently warned of this danger as countries like China buy up stressed assets all around the world.

The last time the Investment Canada Act was strengthened was under Stephen Harper, when we placed tougher restrictions on investments from state-owned foreign investors. That was a vast improvement, but times have changed. With the COVID pandemic, the threat of losing our economic sovereignty has only increased.

Will the minister commit today to conducting a full review of the Investment Canada Act, yes or no?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I'd like to thank the member opposite for his very important question. He raises a very important point that today, at a time when our economy is facing a very difficult situation, Canadian companies are particularly vulnerable. Today is also a time when we have particular reason to pay attention to the sanctity of our supply chains in areas like medical equipment and food security.

Let me assure the honourable member that our government, informed by the work of our excellent intelligence analysts, is very focused on ensuring the safety and sanctity of Canadian companies and on ensuring that they are not acquired inappropriately.

• (1320)

Hon. Ed Fast: Madam Chair, that wasn't my question. My question was a yes-or-no question.

Will the minister conduct a full review of the Investment Canada Act to prevent Canadian flagship companies and our strategic assets from being bought up by hostile foreign interests, yes or no?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Let me say that the member points to a very important issue, one that I think should concern all Canadians. It is never right for Canadian companies to be acquired by hostile foreign interests in the world today, where we have more reason than ever to be concerned about our national security. We need to pay particular attention to this concern, and we are.

Hon. Ed Fast: I notice, Madam Chair, that the minister did not answer the question, a simple yes-or-no question, so I'll ask it this way: Why won't the minister stand up for Canada and protect us against foreign investments that would harm our economy, undermine our sovereignty and threaten our national security?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I would really like to assure the member opposite, and all Canadians, that our government will always stand up for the national interest. We will always stand up for national security, and that definitely means not allowing hostile interests to buy up our companies.

Hon. Ed Fast: Madam Chair, as a result of Brexit, our third-largest trade partner, the U.K., has announced that it will be reimposing tariffs on Canadian exports. At the same time, the U.K. has reached out to Canada to begin negotiations on a new free trade agreement that would eliminate those tariffs, but there's a problem. The Prime Minister has repeatedly failed Canadians—whether they're farmers, aluminum workers, auto workers or forestry workers—on the trade file and on the bad NAFTA deal that they negotiated. Now the Prime Minister has an opportunity to rehabilitate his tattered reputation on trade. The U.K. is anxious to negotiate free trade agreements with like-minded partners, including Canada.

Can the minister tell us what steps have been taken to engage with the U.K. on a free trade agreement, and will the minister assure us that this government won't again betray our dairy, egg, and chicken farmers and the aluminum industry the way it did in the new NAFTA?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Your time is almost up.

I would ask the Deputy Prime Minister to respond briefly—or the minister.

Hon. Mary Ng: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the honourable member for that very good question. Canada is a strong partner for the U.K., as it is with the European Union. I want to assure Canadian businesses and my colleague that CETA will continue to apply to the U.K. during the transition, and that we will continue to work with the U.K. to secure our strong and stable trading relationship going forward to the benefit of the economies in both countries.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Calgary Heritage, Mr. Benzen.

Mr. Bob Benzen (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Countries worldwide are recognizing the pandemic's terrible effects on their energy industries by scaling back carbon taxes. Norway, for example, has reduced carbon taxes to zero until 2024. Many countries that have a carbon tax have instituted relief measures to help their citizens and producers. Canada's industry is reeling, yet the Liberals are sticking with their tax hike. Why is Canada among the world's outliers on the carbon tax during a crisis?

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

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson (Minister of Environment and Climate Change): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Our most urgent priority, obviously, at this time is COVID-19 and the health and safety of Canadians. As we support Canadians through this time, we also have to ensure the long-term economic, environmental and physical well-being of our country and our citizens. Putting a price on pollution is a critical part of Canada's plan to tackle emissions. It's the most affordable and effective way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. I would say that the way we implemented this puts money in the pockets of families. The vast majority of Canadians get more money back than what they pay for with the price on pollution. It's a policy that's good for the environment, and it's a policy that's good for the economy.

Mr. Bob Benzen: Small business owners are flagging problems with the commercial rent relief program. They say it's flawed and inflexible. It favours landlords with mortgaged properties over those with clear titles, and businesses must lose 70% of revenues just to get relief. Our party has proposed including landlords without mortgages and amending the revenue test. Will the government use these proposals to make the program more responsive to need?

• (1325)

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable minister has 27 seconds for a response.

Hon. Bill Morneau: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] landlords without mortgages to consider how they can be part of this program. We see that as important.

Unfortunately, I think my Internet connection has just stopped, Madam Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): It's working fine at this end.

Hon. Bill Morneau: Okay. Thank you.

I would like him to know that. Of course, we released the details of this program yesterday and we're looking forward to the take-up of the program and are encouraging landlords to become part of this. Together with the provinces, we'll continue to work on this issue.

Mr. Bob Benzen: Minister of Finance, this Liberal government is spending enormous amounts of money every day, borrowing hundreds of billions of dollars to do it. However, when you borrow money, you need to show your lenders a plan for how you will pay it back.

Minister of Finance, what will you ask Canadians to do to repay this money? Will you raise the GST? Are you going to raise personal income taxes, corporate taxes? What will be the pain for Canadians after this?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I want to remind the member that he has to address the question directly to the chair and not the individual member.

The honourable minister has 30 seconds to respond.

Hon. Bill Morneau: Madam Chair, we believe it's absolutely imperative that we support individuals and businesses through this particularly challenging time. We recognize that the investments we are making are extraordinary. We have no plans to raise taxes. When we come out of this, we'll need a strong economy to get back to the growth that will support our long-term opportunities.

Mr. Bob Benzen: The RCMP laboratory has been revising the list of newly prohibited firearms continuously since the order in council. Many 12-gauge, pump-action shotguns have been added, and they are still being added as we speak. The RCMP seem to consider them variants of the AR-15.

Would the minister provide the recognized definition of “variant” as found in legislation so that the citizens of Canada can have some clarity around whether their 12-gauge shotguns have suddenly become prohibited firearms?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think our list is quite clear. It contains over 1,500 models and variants of various weapons that are now prohibited.

In addition, the AR-15 frame and model is also clearly prohibited on this list, and is therefore subject to prohibition decisions made by the RCMP. That clarity is crystal clear. As we have stated from the outset, those weapons have no place in our society, and are quite appropriately prohibited.

Mr. Bob Benzen: The firearms reference table standards define the bore of a firearm as the inside of the barrel. These standards measure the bore without the choke mechanism attached. The 12-gauge shotgun's 20-millimetre bore would be banned.

Was the minister intending to ban these shotguns for all law-abiding—

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): A brief answer from the minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: The answer to the member's question is absolutely no.

A 10-gauge shotgun has a bore of 19.69 millimetres. That's recognized by the regulations, and 10-gauge shotguns are not prohibited.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): A reminder that when we call for a brief question, I would ask the members to ask the question and not go into further detail. It will be a lot quicker to get the answer done and respect the time.

The honourable member for Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, Mr. Vidal.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): I have recently received a number of emails from indigenous constituents expressing confusion, fear and even anger regarding the new gun ban.

Can the minister please clarify how this ban will impact indigenous people in my rural and remote northern Saskatchewan riding where people use these weapons to feed themselves and their families during this pandemic?

• (1330)

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable Minister of Public Safety.

Hon. Bill Blair: I understand the confusion because the gun lobby and many of their supporters have purposely been spreading a lot of misinformation about what has been prohibited. I think it is also clear to explain that a two-year amnesty has been put in place as part of this prohibition. It clearly recognizes section 35 constitutional indigenous hunting rights and allows the indigenous members to continue to use the weapons that were previously allowed for hunting for that purpose during the amnesty period.

Mr. Gary Vidal: I appreciate the minister's acknowledging that these newly banned guns are used by hunters and are critical to food security in my riding.

Before the COVID pandemic, first nation leaders in my riding were having checkpoints set up at the entrances of their communities to address safety concerns related to violent gang activity. Gang activity is a major source of concern for these first nations and many rural areas in my riding. The government's gun ban will do nothing to address this problem.

From a first nations perspective, whom did you or your government consult before issuing the order in council?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I want to remind the member he's to address the question to the chair.

The honourable minister has about 40 seconds to respond.

Hon. Bill Blair: There was very extensive consultation on this issue with Canadians from coast to coast, including indigenous communities. I would also remind the member that in the last Parliament, our government invested \$347 million in policing right across the country. That money is available. Some \$214 million has been made available to the provinces for distribution to municipal and indigenous police services to deal with gun and gang issues.

The member's party voted against those measures, but we'll continue to work hard to keep communities safe and to make the investments that will achieve that safety.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Madam Chair, the government was elected on a promise of reconciliation and consultation. In doing that, it agreed to an MOU behind the backs of the elected chiefs and the members of the Wet'suwet'en people.

John Horgan, the premier of British Columbia, acknowledged last Wednesday, on the eve of the signing, that the consultation process had fallen short of his expectations. Does the minister agree with Premier Horgan that the government has fallen short on the consultation process?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations): In 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada strongly encouraged parties in its Delgamuukw and Gisday'wa decision to pursue good faith negotiations regarding aboriginal rights.

The MOU we signed breathes life into that decision by marking an important step in our shared work. It lays the path for substantive discussions toward the final agreements, which would then describe the future governance and implementation of Wet'suwet'en rights and title. It's not an agreement on the implementation of the rights but a shared commitment to begin that work.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Madam Chair, the March 1 news release announcing the MOU says, "If ratified, Minister Fraser and Minister Bennett have agreed to return to Wet'suwet'en territory to sign."

Why did the minister, when she knew that the elected chiefs and Wet'suwet'en people were not consulted and there was in fact no ratification process, proceed with signing this agreement anyway?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Any agreement going forward would have to be taken back to all the Wet'suwet'en people for approval through a process that must clearly demonstrate the consent of the members of the nation. It was important that we begin, and with the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak it was impossible to do that in person.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will have a brief question by Mr. Vidal. There are only 30 seconds left.

Mr. Gary Vidal: I appreciate that, Minister, and that's my whole point on the Wet'suwet'en issue.

At committee, we have been consistently shut down for discussing this issue, and you just used the reason that due to the pandemic, the consultation process was not allowed to be carried out appropriately.

Again I ask why you signed this agreement when there wasn't proper consultation.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Again I remind Mr. Vidal that he's to address the questions to the Chair and not to individual members.

The honourable minister may give a brief answer, please.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think the member misrepresented what I said. Because of COVID, it was impossible to go back to do the signing, but we believe the work of the hereditary chiefs and the work that will happen now with the elected chiefs will go forward because of the MOU that was signed.

• (1335)

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair

The Prime Minister announced the Canada Summer Jobs program a few months ago. He tried to get us to believe that there were 70,000 new jobs. Then he announced the Canada emergency student benefit, encouraging our young people to put their feet up and relax. Now, he is withholding confirmations for jobs under the Canada summer jobs program. Total confusion!

Businesses and organizations are waiting for the Canada summer jobs program confirmations in order to hire students. In Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, only 57 jobs have been confirmed out of the 140 that were already pre-approved. Why the delay in confirming the others?

This is a month behind schedule. Young university and college students are idle and prepared to work. The government's inconsistency is inexplicable.

Can the government confirm all these jobs immediately to help our companies and organizations, and allow our students and young people to take part in the economic recovery following COVID-19?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We'll go now to the honourable Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion.

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Madam Chair, let me assure everyone and all Canadians that we amended and improved the Canada summer jobs program this summer in response to COVID-19 and the reality that the jobs that were available in January just aren't available anymore.

We're working really hard, both with MPs and employers, to ensure that there are meaningful opportunities for our young people and that we can reach the target of 70,000 jobs for this summer. We're going to do that. I can also say that when we announced our \$9-billion student package, we included an additional 76,000 jobs.

I appreciate that this is perhaps a little burdensome on MPs, but I know they're willing to dig in and help their communities in this time of crisis.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joël Godin: Madam Chair, the minister just said that the program had been improved, but when jobs are lost in a crisis, during a pandemic caused by COVID-19, I do not see any improvement.

Can the honourable Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion tell us why this year, in the middle of the pandemic, fewer businesses and organizations are able to hire a student under the Canada Summer jobs program?

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'll offer the clarification that it is not actually the case. We are providing 70,000 jobs through Canada summer jobs. That was our commitment; that remains our commitment.

Perhaps he is referring to the fact that all jobs are now subsidized at 100%, and I can assure him that from the beginning we've budgeted all these jobs at 100%. While we are now increasing subsidies for these jobs, we are providing the exact same number of jobs as we've always committed to doing.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joël Godin: What I just heard is not true. I have the same budget in the riding of Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier and there are 40 fewer jobs. So I do not know how the minister did the calculation.

Moving on to another subject, the Prime Minister has often said that all Canadians would receive assistance. I would like to mention two very specific cases in this regard.

To begin with, what would the Prime Minister be able to say to entrepreneurs who have had to shut down their company permanently during the crisis? They have no employment insurance benefits, they do not receive the Canada emergency benefit and have lost their retirement pension.

What has the government provided for business owners like this?

[*English*]

Hon. Mary Ng: Madam Chair, I know how difficult it is for so many of our entrepreneurs and small businesses throughout this difficult period. It's why we've introduced many measures to help our small businesses and our entrepreneurs through this, whether it is the wage subsidy or the small business loan, or just helping them keep their costs low by deferring GST and HST and customs duties. There are a number of measures, many measures.

The work is not done. We're going to keep working to support our small businesses in our country.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joël Godin: There is therefore nothing for this entrepreneur.

Now for the second part of my question.

A 63-year-old woman with a chronic illness had to stop working three years ago. She has no employment insurance benefits, is not receiving the CEB and does not have a retirement pension.

What can the Prime Minister say to this honest citizen

• (1340)

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Madam Chair, we can tell that citizen that we have her back through the increase in the GIS, through the seniors benefit.

Oh, no, I apologize. The age limit wasn't there. However, I can assure the member that if that citizen is receiving early OAS or GIS, we are there for her.

The Chair: The next question goes to Ms. Wilson-Raybould.

Ms. Wilson-Raybould.

Hon. Jody Wilson-Raybould (Vancouver Granville, Ind.): Thank you.

Race-related crimes are on the rise against persons of Asian descent in Canada. I think we can all agree that there is no place for this in our society.

Having issues with the manner in which the government of another country conducts itself does not give licence for being racist. It has absolutely no bearing on how we expect people to treat one another. For thousands of Asian Canadians, this is their home too.

What is the government going to do to step up actions against hate crimes in this country and send a clear and public message that Canada will not tolerate other countries' failure to respect the rule of law?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Bardish Chagger (Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth): I thank the member for that really important question. This is something that we have been seeing. As the member has signalled, there has been an increase in racist and discriminatory acts.

There is no space for this within Canada. We will continue to condemn all forms of racism and discrimination. We have an anti-racism strategy and I hope to get another follow-up question so that I can expand on the work we're doing.

Hon. Jody Wilson-Raybould: Thank you.

There is going to be significant cost to some charities and not-for-profit organizations to adopt some of the government health and safety policies in light of COVID-19, not dissimilar to the costs incurred to provide physical security to houses of worship in light of the rise of hate crimes globally.

Will the federal government consider a scenario where there is a new program or update to the security infrastructure program to help cover these costs?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, yes, actually, even pre-COVID, we recognized that there was an increase in discrimination, especially when it came to places of worship being attacked. That's why we put in place measures to ensure that places of worship had opportunities to be able to hire security, put in camera infrastructure and so forth. We will continue to ensure that those measures are in place, even post-COVID, because it is essential that every Canadian be able to contribute and do their fair share and do their part.

Unless somebody is indigenous, everyone has immigrated to Canada at some point. It's important that we stand up for each other, and it's important that we call out these racist attacks.

Hon. Jody Wilson-Raybould: As many jurisdictions begin lifting restrictions, and as we Canadians adapt to our new normal, we need to be prepared for a second wave of COVID-19. Can the government confirm that it is planning for a second wave? Will the existing aid programs be reinstated in the event of a second wave? Will there be enough PPE and critical medical equipment? Are we ensuring that we have all the necessary authorities in place to respond quickly and effectively?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I thank the member of Parliament for a very important question. In fact, having been able to get through what I would say is our first wave of COVID-19 has allowed us to learn some very important lessons about how to work even more efficiently together at the provincial and territorial levels. It's the work that we need to continue to do to acquire PPE, for example, and to ensure that we have the processes in place to do rapid testing and contact tracing, and to be able to support citizens to adopt healthy behaviours and to help citizens understand that we really are just in the first leg of this and that we're going to need to continue to—

The Chair: We'll go back to Ms. Wilson-Raybould.

Hon. Jody Wilson-Raybould: I appreciate that answer.

There's still some time before there's going to be a vaccine, and it's good to see the international cooperation around respect for information sharing. I believe Canada has a significant international role to play.

Will Canada take a strong stand at the World Health Assembly to support vulnerable populations around the world having access to the vaccine and for equitable distribution? What steps is the government taking in this regard?

• (1345)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Absolutely. In fact, it was very important at the World Health Assembly to have Canada's statement presented, which called for a global solution to COVID-19. I'm really grateful for this question because we in fact know that we can't eliminate COVID-19 if we don't act together. We know that Canada has an opportunity to provide leadership, to provide funding, as we have, to organizations like Gavi, for example, which ensures access to vaccines for some of the most vulnerable in our world.

We'll continue to do that work, to encourage our partners all across the world to see this as a true partnership in protecting our citizens.

The Chair: The next question goes to Ms. Qaqqaq.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq (Nunavut, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll give just a very quick shout out to the IT team and our interpreters who have been working so hard to get everything working as smoothly as possible for us. It's great to see more and more headsets as we continue with our virtual Parliament.

Pauktuutit, the organization that represents Inuit women of Canada, had identified the lack of transitional and shelter housing as their highest priority leading into 2020, prior to the pandemic.

Across Canada, emergency shelters are well past their limits and tragically turn away Canadians who need help every single night. This is truer for Inuit women. It is also clear that COVID-19 has forced more women into dangerous and abusive positions and situations.

In this moment of crisis, will the federal government commit to supporting critical transitional housing and shelter infrastructure, as Pauktuutit has proposed for Inuit Nunangat and Nunavut?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development): I thank my colleague for her very important question. On behalf of the Government of Canada and, I think, all parliamentarians, I'd also like to express our gratitude to front-line support workers, including those at Pauktuutit, for their work and strong advocacy.

We are absolutely committed to supporting their work in addressing and preventing gender-based violence and are committed to doing so with a whole-of-government approach.

The Chair: Ms. Qaqqaq.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

That wasn't actually any answer, so I and my office will be following up.

Prior to COVID-19, communities across Nunavut were already facing a lack of clean drinking water. Nunavummiut are working as hard as they can to follow the health guidelines that have been proposed. They face painful decisions like choosing to wash their hands or having enough water to be able to cook and clean.

As we move into summer months, especially with spring melt and everything going on environmentally, it will be even harder for

some communities to access basic drinking water and meet other accessible water needs. COVID-19 has put Nunavut's basic human rights into focus. When will this federal government commit to making sure that every community in Nunavut has access to clean water. If they need funding for it, why don't they finally crack down on tax havens?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Dan Vandal (Minister of Northern Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to begin by commending the Government of Nunavut for its hard work during this pandemic. I believe it's because of their hard work and their actions that we have not seen the same outbreak in Nunavut that other regions have seen.

I completely agree that the needs of Nunavut are unique, and that is why Nunavut has received over \$30 million to address the immediate health, economic and transportation priorities related to COVID-19, as well as \$5 million for air services.

The issue of water for Canadian citizens, north and south, Inuit and non-indigenous, is of tremendous importance to our government. We have committed to making sure that every Canadian, every Inuit citizen, every first nation and every Métis citizen has access to drinking water.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: Mr. Chair, I would also like to point out that the \$30 million that was sent took over a month to actually get to the territory and it was \$42 million that was requested, so it wasn't enough money and it took quite a while to get to the territory.

In my riding of Nunavut, airlines are the only way to get between communities and in and out of the territory. It's our transportation. It's our ambulance. It's our highways. Airlines serving Nunavut have committed to providing services as they can, but are facing a tremendously uncertain future without the normal commercial transportation their businesses are built around.

When is the federal government going to step up and make sure that remote communities across Nunavut still get the deliveries and the resources they need for the months to come?

• (1350)

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Marc Garneau (Minister of Transport): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are very concerned, obviously, about ensuring that air travel to communities in the north is possible. That is why we worked with the Government of Nunavut to come to an agreement whereby we would transfer to them \$5 million to ensure that Canadian North was able to provide the necessary services, not only to move people across the territory but also to ensure that essential cargo could be delivered.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Vignola.

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Mr. Chair, in a crisis, it is important to be able to cope, but also to prepare for the post-crisis period. In order to do so, it is essential to know where we stand at the moment, hence the importance of tabling an economic update.

Will the minister be tabling an economic update in June, as provided?

The Chair: The honourable minister can reply.

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, that is a very important question.

As you are aware, we have explained the measures and the costs of the measures transparently every day and every week. We also have to look to the future. To be sure, when the economic situation becomes more stable, we will—

The Chair: Back to Ms. Vignola

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Are we going to have an economic update in June, as provided?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we are assessing the situation. When the economic situation has become more stable, we will prepare an economic update.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Mr. Chair, in order to be able to ensure economic stability, it is important to look to the future, and for that it is necessary to know where we stand now.

Are we going to have a full economic update in June, as provided?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, it is very important to have all the information we need for us to do our work. That is why we are going to prepare an economic update when the situation has become stable enough to make forecasts.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Okay!

Mr. Chair, what are the economic growth forecasts for the coming months?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, the situation is very unsettled because of the pandemic. It is therefore difficult to make accurate forecasts.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Mr. Chair, I am going to switch to another question.

Does the minister have an economic recovery plan?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we are working together towards a plan for Canadians and employers during the pandemic, and will give consideration to the next steps when the circumstances—

The Chair: Back to you, Ms. Vignola.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: There is of course a plan during the pandemic, but what will happen after that? I am talking about economic recovery. Is there a plan? If so, can we see it?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we are working with all the MPs during the pandemic to ensure that we can examine the future steps that will lead to a more stable situation.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Mr. Chair, the businesses are already prepared to contribute significantly to the economic recovery by creating quality jobs and skilled jobs. One such company is Chantier Davie here in the Quebec City area. Its reopening would lead to at least 3,000 jobs.

Is the minister going to miss the boat yet again or is there truly a recovery plan that includes Chantier Davie?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we know that we have to work with companies on an economic recovery plan. It's important to do so.

We are now assessing how we can protect employees and employers by coming up with a plan between now and the end of the crisis. This would ensure that our economy is in a good position for the recovery.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Mr. Chair, I understand the need to protect people during the crisis. But to see the forest, you have to stand back from the trees. It's essential to anticipate and look to the future.

Hence my question: is there an economic recovery plan? Is there also an update with a view to implementing the plan?

● (1355)

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we know that it is very important to review the next phases. That is why the Prime Minister mentioned last week that we would have to look into the possibility of granting the Wage subsidy until the end of August, while keeping an eye on its conditions and criteria. By doing so, we would be working to improve a situation that changes from month to month.

We will be providing more details soon.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

We'll now go on to Mr. Melillo.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will direct my questions to the Minister of Public Safety regarding the government's gun-confiscation plan. Why is the government creating more rules for hunters and sport shooters instead of targeting violent criminals?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: Perhaps the member opposite missed our announcement, in which we prohibited weapons that were designed neither for hunting nor for sport shooting but were designed for soldiers for use in combat. They have no place in civil society. Those weapons are now prohibited. I'm looking forward—

The Chair: Now we'll go back to Mr. Melillo.

Mr. Eric Melillo: The minister actually admitted earlier in this committee that some of the firearms he has prohibited are used for hunting. I would like to note that the minister often uses terms like “military style” and “assault style”. I'd like to provide the minister some time to define that ambiguous term for us.

Hon. Bill Blair: If the member opposite needs any clarity, I'd invite him to go to the order in council and look at the 1,500 models and variants we have now prohibited. They include such weapons as those used at Christchurch, at Sandy Hook, in Montreal at the École Polytechnique and in Quebec at the mosque. They are weapons that have been used for mass murder, and they have no place in our society.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I'm afraid, Mr. Chair, that this does not provide any more clarity for us, but I will move on.

I would like to know if the minister's department has any estimates on how many gangs and criminal organizations are going to comply with this ban.

Hon. Bill Blair: We know, Mr. Chair, that many of the people involved in criminal activities get their guns from a number of different locations. That's why we'll be taking very strong steps at the very first opportunity to bring legislation forward to stop guns from being smuggled into the country, to stop them from being stolen from gun owners and to stop them from being criminally diverted. We've made investments in communities and in law enforcement to deal with gun activity—

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

Mr. Melillo.

Mr. Eric Melillo: If the minister and his department have the number, can he tell us how many gangs he expects to comply with this ban?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, I fully expect that as a result of the measures that we will take, it will be far more difficult for anyone who wishes to commit a crime with a firearm to gain access to that firearm. As for firearms that have been used to murder innocent civilians and women in this country, they have now been prohibited.

Mr. Eric Melillo: The Conservative Party has brought forward a number of solutions to combat gun crime. These include stronger mental health supports and crackdowns on illegal gun smuggling. I would like to know if the minister agrees that programs such as those would be more beneficial than his plan?

Hon. Bill Blair: Let's talk facts, Mr. Chair. In fact, a Conservative government, prior to our being elected, actually cut funding for the RCMP and our border services officers by hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of people and staff, thereby weakening our response to those gangs. For some reason, the Conservatives don't want to talk about guns when we're talking about gun crime.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Does the minister know how much this firearms confiscation plan is going to cost? If so, would he agree that money would be better spent cracking down on gun smuggling?

Hon. Bill Blair: I'm glad the member mentioned gun smuggling because we invested \$86 million in the CBSA and RCMP to conduct investigations at our border for those gangs and individuals responsible for smuggling guns, and the member's party voted against that.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I would like to provide the minister about 30 seconds to elaborate on that plan and tell us how his government has taken action on cracking down on gun smuggling, because many people haven't seen it.

Hon. Bill Blair: I'd invite the member to maybe drop by one of the hard-working, posted points of entry, where our CBSA officers are doing an extraordinary job and utilizing the new tools, resources and staffing we have provided. We're going to continue to do that by bringing forward new authorities, new offences and new penalties for those people who smuggle guns into this country. I hope the member opposite will finally support—

● (1400)

The Chair: Mr. Melillo, a brief question.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I'd like to know if the minister has any statistics on how many guns are smuggled into Canada each year versus guns that are domestically sourced and used in gun crimes in Canada.

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, we do.

The Chair: I'm afraid that's all the time we have for questions today.

This committee stands adjourned.

[*Translation*]

Good day to everyone.

The meeting is adjourned.

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