



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 018

Friday, June 19, 2020

Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina



Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Friday, June 19, 2020

• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 18 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

I'd like to start by acknowledging that I am joining you today from the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinabe and Chonnonton nations.

Pursuant to the order of reference of April 20, 2020, the committee is meeting for the purpose of receiving evidence concerning matters related to the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference and the proceedings will be available via the House of Commons website. During the meeting the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entire committee.

To facilitate the work of our interpreters and ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules.

Interpretation in the video conference will work very much like in a regular committee. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English, or French. To resolve the sound issues, we ask those who wish to speak during the meeting to set your interpretation language as follows. If speaking in English, please ensure you are on the English channel. If speaking in French, please ensure you are on the French channel. As you are speaking, if you plan to alternate from one language to the other, you will need to switch the interpretation channel to align with the language you are speaking. You may wish to allow for a short pause when switching languages.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak you can either click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, or you can hold down the space bar while you are speaking. As you release the bar it will mute itself, like a walkie-talkie.

I remind members and witnesses that all comments should be addressed through the chair. Should members need to request the floor outside their designated time for questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, they should use the "raise hand" function. This will signal to the chair your interest to speak, and to do so, click

"participants" at the bottom of the screen. When the list comes up, you'll see, next to your name, that you can click "raise hand". I'll watch for that icon.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

The use of headsets is strongly encouraged. If you have earbuds with a microphone, please hold the microphone near your mouth when you are speaking to boost the sound quality for our interpreters.

Should technical challenges arise, please advise the chair or clerk immediately and the technical team will work to resolve them. We may need to suspend during these times as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

Before we get started, can everyone click on the top right corner of their screen and ensure they are on gallery view. With this view you should be able to see all participants in a grid. It will ensure that all video participants can see each other.

During the meeting we'll follow the same rules that usually apply to the opening statements and the rounds of questioning. Witnesses have up to 10 minutes for an opening statement, which is what we will be offering Ms. Bennett.

If everyone is in order and in place, I'd like to welcome our first witness for this hour, the Honourable Carolyn Bennett, the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations.

Minister Bennett, welcome, and I am giving you 10 minutes for your opening presentation.

[Translation]

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm joining you today from my home in Toronto, on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. I want to acknowledge that you're also on traditional territories.

I'm pleased to be here today to speak about the ongoing work to develop a national action plan in response to the issues identified in the final report and the calls for justice from the national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls.

• (1105)

[English]

I think it's important that we recognize that when we all come to terms with the horrifying images and stories over the past several weeks and the undeniable evidence of systemic racism in Canada, it is essential that all Canadians speak out against the racism inherent in colonization.

We need to call out misogyny and discrimination. In fact, it reflects the stories that we've heard for decades from the families and survivors of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, two-spirit and gender-diverse peoples.

We will not be able to stop this national tragedy until we have dealt effectively with the systemic racism and sexism in our institutions from coast to coast. Every day our hearts are with the families of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, two-spirit and gender-diverse people and survivors. I promise we will not let them down.

I can assure members that our government is working on an urgent basis with our partners on further concrete actions to end the ongoing tragedy of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, two-spirit and gender-diverse people, including the development of a national action plan.

We are grateful for all the work of all of the provincial, territorial and indigenous partners toward a national action plan, despite the challenges of COVID-19. Our shared work continues to seek justice and healing for the families and survivors. We are working to create the space where indigenous women, girls, two-spirit and gender-diverse people can take back their rightful place of dignity and leadership.

Since our government was elected in 2015, we have put in place concrete actions to address the national tragedy. The family information liaison units established in 2016 after the pre-inquiry were installed in victims services in every province and territory and have been very well received by families to help them navigate government agencies and to access all the available information they are seeking about their missing or murdered loved ones in the system, and to access healing supports.

Justice Canada is now providing funding to extend these supports to 2023. In 2017 we responded to the inquiry's interim report with nearly \$50 million of investments, increasing health supports and victim services for families and survivors, supporting the RCMP national investigative standards and practices unit and funding organizations with expertise in law enforcement and policing to review police policies and practices.

During the pre-inquiry, the stories of the families and survivors in their poignant testimony demanded changes to the damaging child and family services system, the need to value, preserve and protect indigenous languages and culture, the need to toughen criminal law in cases of domestic assault and to eliminate gender discrimination under the Indian Act. We have legislated those changes.

Our historic investments in education, housing, policing and shelters are making a difference. We know more is needed and we are committed to continuing to make the necessary investments and

to drive the needed institutional changes that will deal with the systemic and institutional failures that have led to this ongoing tragedy.

Our government, indigenous leaders, survivors, families and the provincial and territorial governments are working hard to develop the national action plan that will set a clear road map to ensure that indigenous women and girls, two-spirit and gender-diverse people are safe wherever they live.

This work began long before COVID-19 and remains a priority. In recent months, fighting COVID-19 has demanded the attention of all of our partners and has presented unique challenges to engagement for everyone. Since the election, we have been providing support to national and regional indigenous organizations representing women, LGBTQ and two-spirit people to ensure that first nations, Inuit and Métis voices are priorities at the centre of our work.

As I told the committee on Tuesday, for a national action plan to be truly accountable, we need to determine the indicators and reporting timelines to ensure an effective and accountable action plan. Governments must report, measure, adapt, measure and adapt. The families and survivors must be part of the work to make sure that this national action plan is truly effective.

The supplementary estimates (A), which passed this week, will provide the first \$6 million of the \$30 million over the next five years. We have committed to ensuring that families and survivors will be involved in assessing the results obtained by the national action plan and guiding the changes necessary to truly protect the lives of indigenous women and girls, two-spirit and gender-diverse people.

I really look forward to your questions and your advice as we go forward together.

Thank you. *Meegwetch.*

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. I appreciate your timeliness because I know our questioners are eager to move forward.

The first round is a six-minute round. I have Mr. Battiste, Ms. Michaud and Ms. Gazan, but I didn't get the Conservative Party speaker. So, Mr. Schmale, Mr. Zimmer, who will be up first?

Mr. Zimmer, please go ahead.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to thank the minister for coming today and also for some work on some very significant local files. I appreciate your time on them.

Minister, of course we're here about MMIW this morning.

The Native Women's Association of Canada, NWAC, said it was appalled by your decision to delay the national action plan indefinitely. According to NWAC's president, Lorraine Whitman, the government is using the pandemic as an excuse. Others have used words like confused and disappointed.

How do you respond to this reaction to your decision?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The Native Women's Association is a very important partner as we go forward. We received their advice on what they consider important in a national action plan in the past weeks, or month, I think. As we heard last night from the Manitoba coalition, it's really important that those on the front line who are protecting and advocating for indigenous women and girls were also on the front line of COVID-19 and feeding the people in urban centres.

The people on the front lines understand, as well as our partners in the provinces and territories who had some very significant challenges, but we are very optimistic that we will have a national action plan. It will be good; it will be accountable and for the first national public inquiry, it will include all of our national partners with their own chapters and an accountability framework that will not let down the families and survivors.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Minister.

You brought up the plan and spoke a little about what it looks like, but I'd like you to get into a little more depth and describe the progress to date with the national action plan. We know it's not here yet. Where is it? How soon are you ready to roll it out and get it going?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We are now in the process of having to build the plan from the bottom up. It means that each of the provinces and territories is working on their own chapter.

We had a very positive call with Yukon last month because they were almost ready to release their four-point plan.

Yesterday we heard from Manitoba and, again, I think when the provincial or territorial government works with the women's coalitions as well as the first nations or Inuit or Métis partners, you can see what happens in those concrete actions to stop this tragedy, but we also see the healing.

We are moving forward. One of the things I talked about on Tuesday was, of course, choosing the indicators that will be measured, and how often they will be measured, and how we move over the next five years to make sure this national action plan is working. We will need consensus as to the appropriate indicators, how often they will be measured, how often the families and survivors think the plan needs to be adapted to make it more effective.

That is really important work. As you know, some statistics are easy to find at Statistics Canada. We're going to have to be more intentional about finding others, and we have learned through

COVID-19 that unless we have the data in real time, we are operating in the dark. We want to be accountable and show results.

• (1115)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: You have just spoken about it, and consultation is a big part of this process, or is supposed to be. I know a minister can only do so much, but how do you respond to statements that families of the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls are not being consulted and kept up to date on the progress?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As we have learned from the families and survivors, there is a very important relationship that they have, or need to have, with their provinces and territories. In order to build this up, everything is about making sure that we have effective measures on the ground and then lift up those to a working plan or a national action plan that includes the wise and best practices of all the regions.

Building on strength is what I've heard; don't reinvent the wheel. There are things that are working, like the family liaison units. As we move forward, we will ensure that families and survivors are in the appropriate working groups and are part of developing the plan. We really want them to be essential and central to the evaluation of whether the plan is working as we go forward over the next five years. That's why the \$6 million per year for five years has been built into the supplementary estimates this week.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Bob, interpretation needs your mike up a bit.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Okay.

I'm just about out of time, but, Minister, I want to thank you for that. I know that there are a lot of people waiting for this to happen. I'm a resident of British Columbia and am close to Prince George. Sadly, I've seen far too many families affected by this. I know that everybody is looking for a solution to this huge problem and situation.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Battiste, you have six minutes.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Minister, on Wednesday of this week, I attended a healing walk in my riding where we were marching to bring awareness and to highlight our need to take action against racism.

Along the way of about a kilometre walk, we stopped and paid respects in all of the places in that area where we've lost Mi'kmaw people without getting any answers as to why. It was very humbling to see this.

During that time, I was approached by Annie Bernard-Daisley, president of the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association. She shared with me the frustration that she felt in that we haven't acted fast enough on the recommendations of the missing and murdered indigenous women's inquiry's recommendations. I shared with her that I would be willing to come and talk to them and give them an update.

Minister, can you share with me what steps we are taking to address the recommendations and our time frames? Also, can you share with the committee some of the key things you've been hearing during your engagements?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you for this, Jaime.

I think the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association has been really at the front of so many real concrete actions. Certainly, in your province, we are speaking with Minister Kelly Regan, and we are developing together with the Native Women's Association a Nova Scotian plan that is going to be really important.

As I said in my remarks, right from the beginning we weren't going to wait for the final report to begin the work on the legislation that would protect women, girls, and two-spirit and gender-diverse people with the investments in shelters, housing, health care, and healing supports, and the commemoration money that Minister Monsef has been able to distribute. It is about our working together now on developing that national action plan that will be accountable. We do know that it is urgent and that the families and survivors have been waiting a long time for there to be a commission. Now we are impatient about putting in the concrete actions to stop the tragedy. We believe that we, as a federal government, have begun in a good way to deal with the response to the interim report and now the kinds of priorities that the families and survivors have been saying to us for a very long time.

• (1120)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Minister, one of the things there's been a lot of discussion on lately is the systematic racism within the system. Mi'kmaw people and indigenous people across Canada don't feel that they're getting the same treatment in the justice system as regular Canadians. We know that this is an all-of-government approach—provincial, municipal and federal.

Can you tell me a little bit about how we're working with our partners in different government jurisdictions to ensure that future Mi'kmaw women will grow up believing in a justice system that's going to help them, that is going to look after them, and that won't victimize them?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As you know, Jaime, throughout the pre-inquiry what we heard from families was that “it's a justice system, just not for us”, and I think that is really what they feel—that it's not a safe place even to report a missing person. As I've said, some of the families chose not to correct a missing persons report that said the person was Caucasian because they thought the quality of the search or the investigation would be less important if indeed she was viewed to be an indigenous woman, whereas we know what happened in the Downtown Eastside. Somehow, when somebody went missing, it was viewed as inevitable and filled with judgment.

We have a lot to do, because it's not just the policing or the investigation. It's what happens in terms of the charges that are laid, the plea bargaining and the sentencing. Indigenous people do not feel that it is fair, and thus we see all the unacceptable incarceration rates, where often the victim is blamed. That's the way they feel they've been treated.

I think we're working with our partners in the provinces and territories. We had a very positive call yesterday with National Chief Perry Bellegarde and Regional Chiefs Teegee and Picard on moving forward. Minister Blair, Minister Lametti, Minister Miller and I were on a call about a commitment to first nations policing and moving forward on the tripartite agreement that could be almost ready to go in British Columbia in terms of how you change policing to be more community based, and with community members, as we've heard about with the excellent approach in Yukon, with the peace officers there who are reducing the calls to the RCMP by 30%.

I think that having the right to and the statutory funding for first nations policing... It will be interesting to see whether the Mi'kmaq Nation is also interested in that, following up on the excellent progress that you have had on education and whether we could move that to first nations policing in Nova Scotia as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our next speaker is Madame Michaud.

You have the floor for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to say that I'm still in Gaspésie, on the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq people.

Thank you, Minister, for your opening remarks. I completely agree with you. It's refreshing to hear a minister openly acknowledge the existence of systemic racism in Canada. We'll have the opportunity to discuss the issue at the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security starting next week. I'm very enthusiastic about this perspective.

The national action plan regarding missing indigenous women was supposed to be tabled this month, but this won't happen. Is there a new time frame that you could provide today?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you for agreeing with the need to address systemic racism. This issue exists in all our institutions, including the health care, education and justice systems. I think that these are the effects of colonization. The colonizers were seen as superior.

I think that it's impossible to erase the tragedy of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. The fight against systemic racism is crucial.

• (1125)

Ms. Kristina Michaud: We see eye to eye on this. I'm sure that the national action plan, which follows up on the results of the national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, will help us find solutions. The many people waiting for the tabling of this plan include the Native Women's Association of Canada, or NWAC, and their families.

Do you know when the plan will be tabled?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The first step is to reach a consensus on indicators so that the action plan has the accountability needed to combat this tragedy with the families and survivors. I think that we must have a plan for the next five years that includes indicators and that allows for this accountability. The plan must include chapters for each province or territory and for first nations, Métis people, Inuit and gender diverse peoples.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: I understand that the different provinces, Quebec and the families are stakeholders in the process, which is under way. In terms of the time frame, are we talking about three months or six months? Can we expect the action plan to be tabled in 2020?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I hope that it will be tabled as soon as possible. I can provide the example of the good work done by Minister Lebel and Minister D'Amours in your province. The work done by the Viens commission and the national inquiry must be reflected in the national plan. I hope that this will be done as soon as possible and that it will be a real plan that will allow for accountability.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: I imagine that funding will accompany the plan and that there will be concrete measures. Can you elaborate on this? The plan was supposed to be tabled in June, so the work must be well under way. Do you have concrete examples of measures that the government will take to find solutions to the issues identified in the inquiry?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: During Zoom meetings, we heard about the critical need for action and investment in the areas of housing, safe transportation, mental health, prevention and support for families and survivors.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: On another note—

[English]

The Chair: We're at time right there, Minister.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Gazan, you're up for a six-minute round of questions.

• (1130)

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the minister for attending today.

On Tuesday you stated, "This has been an emotional time. We have all been upset by the images on our screens and the undeniable

evidence of systemic racism in Canada. It is the basis of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls".

You acknowledge this crisis, yet your government reneged on its promise to have a national action plan in June in spite of the increases in violence against indigenous women that has occurred during COVID-19.

Do you believe that inaction is an appropriate response? You had at least eight months prior to COVID. Chief Commissioner Buller notes that use of that excuse is an embarrassment to the government. Women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people continue to go missing and die. When will a national action plan be released?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: First, thank you for your advocacy, but I also want to say that the work commenced immediately after the national inquiry report was tabled. The assistant deputy ministers committees were struck by all the provinces and territories right after the election. We were able to begin funding the indigenous organizations that needed to engage with their people. Those reports have only recently come in, because of some of the delays as a result of COVID. The work continues and the response to the interim report...

We will not let these families and survivors down. We're going to get this done. Lots of people believe that this, because of the intensity of the kind of discovery of wise practices and respect across the country—

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister Bennett, with all due respect, that is not an acceptable response. Families, advocates and even the commissioners have voiced their concerns about the lack of transparency. In a letter, the commissioners themselves called it "one year of inaction" with "the lack of transparency".

When I tried to get answers from you about when you would release a national action plan, you simply told me to go and look at a website.

Last month, Hilda Anderson-Pyrz of the Manitoba MMIWG2S coalition said, "It's really concerning for me as a family member and as an advocate that we've heard nothing." This is what we've been hearing from family members across the country.

You promised again today not to let them down. It's too late. Your frantic scrambling that we have witnessed over the last weeks clearly demonstrated you have wasted at least eight months since the release of the report, despite your promise to have a national action plan within one year following the report's tabling.

Can you grace this committee with information on at least the stage at which the national action plan is at?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I really dispute the word "inaction". In the half-day I spent with the federal, provincial and territorial ministers on the status of women in December, we asked them to begin identifying their wise practices and to begin building their plan. We have been doing the same at the federal level. I am impressed by the work that has been going on, and particularly with the Manitoba coalition. It has—

Ms. Leah Gazan: Again, Minister, those are not my words. Those are the words of commissioners, family members and victims of violence.

I have one last question, because I have a limited amount of time. A year ago when the MMIWG2S report was released, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, stated that “it’s very important that Canada will make an action plan. A national action plan...”.

It has been over a year now since the report was released, and the international community can see that nothing has been done with respect to the ongoing human rights violations against indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals.

Did your government expect to secure a UN Security Council seat when you clearly turned a blind eye to the human rights violations at home and abroad, in violation of your domestic and international human rights obligations, including your failure to release a national action plan?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think the comment that’s the most important in what you’ve read is the fact that it needs to be a national action plan. This is not a federal report that I can just write and table. This has to be in partnership with every single province and territory, and we have that—

Ms. Leah Gazan: I’m just reiterating your promise, Minister. Your government promised to have a national action plan tabled one year after the report was released. These are not my words; these are your government’s words.

When will the national action plan be released? I would like a date.

• (1135)

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We see this as urgent as well, and we will work with our provinces and territories, and our first nations, Inuit, Métis and two-spirit partners...an urban plan. We need a really good plan, but the most important thing I would like you to help me with would be this. What indicators would you say would enable us to show—

Ms. Leah Gazan: You’ve had almost a year, Minister, to figure out all of these things. Because you’ve now reneged on your promise, I would like you to show your commitment and indicate that this is urgent by actually having a national action plan.

What date can we expect a national action plan?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We will have a national action plan when our partners believe it is appropriate to release that, with a consensus. We are working with our partners to make that happen as soon as possible.

The Chair: Thanks, Minister.

We’ll now go to five-minute rounds with Mr. Schmale, Mr. Powlowski, Mr. Viersen and Ms. Zann.

Mr. Schmale, you have five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, Minister. It’s great to see you again.

You talked about your plan and working with your partners. Can you give us a brief idea of how many partners you have and how

you expect to achieve consensus with each and every one of those groups and individuals?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We start with 13 partners, which is every province and territory, and then we have been very grateful for the input of the AFN Women’s Council, the Michif women as part of the Métis Nation, Pauktuutit, who have done their engagement to be able to inform this plan in the best possible way. NWAC has done its work. The new organization, 2 Spirits in Motion, really did an excellent job of what it believes needs to be part of a national action plan.

We have many other partners. They are informing this, particularly as we develop the indicator data working group to be able to make sure their engagement now informs what will be an accountable plan over the next five years, where we will want to assure families and survivors that we’re getting results with this plan.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Building on what Ms. Gazan was talking about, it’s been over a year and, again, these are your government’s words, not hers or mine. Given the fact that you are working with other partners, how much longer do you think it will take to achieve consensus? Can you tell us what some of the stumbling blocks are so that maybe this committee could help?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That’s a great question.

In Yukon the Women’s Circle, plus the first nations, plus Chief Doris Bill, who has a wise practice on peace officers, together with Minister Dendys and the Government of the Yukon were almost ready before COVID-19 to release a plan on their four points.

We are working with all of the provinces and territories.

In your province, Jamie, Minister Dunlop is working with an advisory committee, but in Ontario, the family liaison units and Kim Murray have really become a wise practice as we build on strengths and make sure that the national action plan reflects the wise and promising practices in all of the provinces and territories.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Minister, in a CTV News article, you were quoted as saying, “We acknowledge we must redouble our efforts to eliminate the systemic racism arising from colonial policies and attitudes”, when talking about the report. Having said that, are you or your department considering speaking or talking more openly about providing off-ramps to those who want to get away from the Indian Act, which is considered racist by many people on all sides of the political spectrum and within Canada in general?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Absolutely, and I think even about the comments I had in a conversation yesterday on first nations policing.

This is all about self-determination and being able to get out of the colonial systems that have not been safe for indigenous peoples in our country. Over half of the Indian Act bands in Canada are now at a table being able to talk about asserting their jurisdiction, whether it’s on child and family services, whether it’s on fish, or whether it’s on education or health care. We are actually, I think, really building towards that kind of momentum in nation building.

We have funding for nation building and a lot of excellent work that really will speak to a new relationship, which will really be based on the recognition of rights and the right to self-determination, as well as on respect and co-operation, and something that feels like a partnership to our partners.

• (1140)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I will address that in the second round.

Thank you very much, everyone.

The Chair: Thanks very much, because we want to ensure that all of our rounds of questions are complete.

Next is Mr. Powlowski for five minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Minister, thanks for being here.

I want to talk a bit about the national action plan. I realize that you've spoken to a lot of people in various communities, especially the indigenous community, as to what goes into the national action plan. I want to find out what you were hearing, especially from the indigenous community, as to what is needed in developing a national plan that is not only effective but also accountable.

In responding, could you talk about both, but especially about the issue of accountability? How can you make such a plan accountable and ensure that, in fact, we're delivering on the plan and that it's actually having results?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you for being able to underline the need for better data. Through COVID-19 I think we've learned we weren't getting good data, and we certainly weren't getting it in real time. You can't manage what you don't measure. For us to be able to honour our pledge to the families and survivors, we will put in concrete actions to stop this tragedy.

We're going to have to show whether it's working or not. That is why the working group on data will build out the kinds of indicators they would want measured and whether that's high-school leaving, children in care or over-incarceration of indigenous people, we need to measure a lot of indicators so we flatten that curve in the way that data matters.

I wanted to speak to you a little about the kind of education that emergency physicians are now being asked to understand: identifying trafficking, and not allowing that adult into the examining room with the young person, when we think we're being nice as doctors. That might be a trafficked person who isn't able to speak to you frankly. We're learning a lot as we listen to families. We listen to victims of trafficking. We listen coast to coast to coast. The measurement piece is going to be the reason that this is indeed a national action plan where we have to show results.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Where are you going to get those statistics? Is this StatsCan you're talking about?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think that disaggregated data has always been difficult to get and I think even in COVID we're now learning that people know they'd better collect it if we're going to be able to be effective in treating it. I think we have to take the

same intentional approach to missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and two-spirited and gender-diverse. This is about us.

I've always worried that the things that are already at StatsCan are easier to collect and measure. Probably we're not measuring right now some indicators we should be measuring. Those will be harder to get, but I think the national inquiry has meant that we need a national plan for this, and that will mean getting the data that will inform the efficacy of a plan.

• (1145)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: In talking to people about statistics related to COVID-19, a common complaint from people in the public health community is the lack of consistent data from hospitals and health care systems, for example. Some of that is apparently because of concerns over privacy. There seems to be a commonality there that we're not getting the kinds of health care statistics that would probably also be needed to inform the national plan. I'm not sure whether you have any thoughts on how to make health care data more accessible to epidemiologists and policy-makers.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: What was interesting in talking to the Manitoba coalition was that there's also the qualitative data, the stories. When an indigenous person dies in emerg of a bladder infection because somebody thought he was intoxicated is evidence of a problem. I think it will be interesting to continue to collect the qualitative data. Not only what was said, or what was done, but how someone was made to feel is this ongoing aggression.

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt.

We go now to Mr. Viersen for five minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you to our guests and witnesses for being here.

Dr. Bennett, for months your government was saying we shouldn't be wearing masks and then that messaging changed. Do you remember the date that message changed?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: All I can tell you, Arnold, is that it's a fight I've been having with my boys from the beginning because, as a physician, I was basing it on the evidence we had to date as to how this virus was transmitted. At the beginning, we did not believe it could be transmitted that way. I have to say that I'm now wearing a mask when I go to the grocery store, and my sons are saying, "We told you so."

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It was May 20, so our first nations communities were probably at risk during the time they weren't wearing masks. Is the government providing masks now to indigenous people?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Absolutely, and I think Minister Miller will be able to expand on that in the next panel.

I have a call every Thursday night with some of the indigenous physicians working in communities across the country, and they are dealing with the reality as the evidence changes and the advice changes, too, but I think they always knew the kind of protection needed to deal with an elder centre or deal with other issues, and they were being provided with the personal protective equipment in order to be able to do their work.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Do you have any idea how many masks have been shipped to first nations communities to this point?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think that Minister Miller and the deputy will be able to explain it. It's quite a large number, and there are also the other kinds of protections in non-medical settings. Some of the people who've put in the checkpoints going in and out of their communities and those kinds of things also needed to have masks, and we have continued to provide what the nations need in order to keep their communities safe.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Have you had any problems with first nations communities getting faulty masks? Has that been an issue?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I don't know, and again that is with Minister Miller, Dr. Gideon, Dr. Wong and Dr. Adams. They will be able to tell you in the next little while. As you know, lots of people were buying from various suppliers. Our job is to support whatever they need.

• (1150)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It's been reported that we've ordered 120 million masks and have gotten about 10 million, and nine million of them don't meet N95 standards. PSPC is saying that they're redirecting them to other organizations outside of the health system. I'm just wondering if they were ending up in our first nations communities.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Again, I think Minister Miller and Minister Anand will be able to answer that. I have to tell you that N95 masks are not comfortable to wear. Our job is to make sure that the medical people have those masks.

I was so touched when I received some beautiful masks, cloth masks, homemade by Angela Bishop from Saskatchewan, who was providing them for the elders as well as the veterans. It's been very impressive to see that work start up so fast in terms of seamstresses being able to provide safety for their communities with the beautiful cloth masks.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll move on now. I appreciate everyone's timeliness.

Ms. Zann, you have five minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Hello there. Thank you, Minister Bennett, for coming back to our committee today.

I want to welcome everybody from the beautiful Mi'kmaq unceded territory here in Cobequid or Wagobagitk, as it used to be called, in Cumberland—Colchester.

We were talking the other day about systemic racism. I have been listening to various programs, the CBC and various other things recently, and reading a lot, of course. What a lot of people

are saying about systemic racism is that we need to keep hiring first nations and black members of the community and have more diversity in jobs, in businesses and also in levels of government.

One of the things I remember from when I was in the provincial government here in Nova Scotia is having arguments with the deputy minister of a particular department because the all-white staff just couldn't understand that our Mi'kmaq community centre and museum did not own their artifacts because they felt the ancestors owned them.

To try to explain that to somebody who just didn't get it and who didn't get the culture, I finally had to say, "Look, you're Scottish from Cape Breton, right? Imagine if you weren't allowed to sing in Gaelic and you weren't allowed to do Highland dancing or you would be thrown in jail. Imagine you weren't allowed to speak your own language."

These are the problems that have been building up. People just don't understand the culture. Again, as we mentioned the other day, it's a lack of respect, too.

What can we do, Minister, to try to change that as quickly as possible? I think this will help deal with the problem of why first nations women and girls are treated like they are not even second-class citizens. They're just not respected or treated with value, and their lives don't seem to be as valued as others'. What do you suggest we can do as a society and a government?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: With it being National Indigenous History Month and what we've been trying to do with indigenous reads and all of the books here, it's hard. I wish I could change it. I think prescribing all the books in the world and the lovely, amazing films by indigenous filmmakers is a start, but it is about a relationship. It is about respect. It is about having indigenous people, women and girls in leadership and making sure they are able to influence the institutions.

From Indigenous Works and Kelly Lendsay's work in Saskatchewan, it's not about changing the indigenous person to be able to fit into an institution. It's about changing the institution so that indigenous people feel safe. Also, it's about how they can influence the institution.

The indigenous world view is really the future of Canada. Thinking seven generations out, using the medicine wheel instead of the medical model, using indigenous pedagogy, respecting elders, putting children first and listening to wise women are all things that were here and were good until the settlers arrived and decided they were superior. That's what we've got to change.

I believe you shouldn't have to be an MD or an MP in order to have new friends. We've got to make it safer for indigenous people to want to work in government. For a lot of them, it's going to the dark side. We need to really be intentional about those kinds of changes in policing, hospitals, universities and all of the institutions where they've had that experience as well.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you very much. We're right at time.

We'll have a two-and-a-half-minute round of questioning now.

Ms. Bérubé, you have the floor.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you.

I want to thank all the participants and witnesses, along with the interpreters and the technical service staff.

I'm on the traditional territory of the Algonquin, Anishinabe and Cree people of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou.

My question is for Minister Bennett.

Why aren't the families of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls being consulted and given information on the national action plan?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you for the question.

The families of survivors must have input into the development of the plan. The plan must also include indicators to allow for accountability over the next five years.

The \$6 million included in the supplementary estimates tabled this week will be used to fund the commitments to the families and survivors and to seek their advice on the plan.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: They'll be given information and consulted on the plan provided. Is that right?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes. We must also consider the provinces' efforts in this area, particularly the work done by Minister D'Amours and Minister Lebel following the Viens commission, and their response to the national inquiry.

The families and survivors must be involved in the development of the plan for Quebec, but also the national plan.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. We're right at time.

We have one more round of two and a half minutes.

Ms. Qaqqaq, please go ahead.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq (Nunavut, NDP): *Matna*, Chair.

This is again an incredibly difficult conversation. When I was growing up, my non-indigenous mother, when I travelled south, always made me take extra precautions. She said if I were to go missing, she didn't know who would look for me besides her. We lose countless of our indigenous sisters and women.

You mentioned to my colleague MP Gazan that while the action plan started in June of 2019, the funding to partners flowed after the election in October of 2019. Am I correct in saying that?

• (1200)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes. That is correct.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: It's interesting that it took over five months to actually start getting things done.

How many partners are there? What is the number for that?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Certainly, it starts with all the provinces and territories, so there's 13 there. Then I think the funded organizations are the Assembly of First Nations women's council, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, Les femmes michif—

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: I just want a number, Minister.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: In terms of the Pauktuutit, obviously, 2 Spirits in Motion—

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: You mentioned all of these, Minister. I'm just asking for a number.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: There are the funded ones, but then there's lots of other advice coming in as well—

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: If you could find me a number, then I would love to know how many you have yet to hear from. You stated that this is something that is a barrier, and I think that's something that's an easy fix. Find the number of partners, how many you have yet to hear from, and reach out to them.

The national action plan has had a year to be developed. COVID has given us lost time, but by my math, that's about 77%. Is it fair to say that the action plan is 77% complete?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Again, it's a matter of the work of all provinces and territories—Yukon, yesterday with Manitoba, talking with your minister Elisapee—and it will be a collaborative effort. We will have a chapter for each province and territory. We want to be able to move forward in a good way with the consensus to make sure this plan is effective.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds, Ms. Qaqqaq.

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

Honestly, I've just put my hands up. It's very frustrating to hear these conversations all the time when our women and children are having their safety compromised and we lose lives.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I agree with you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're right out of time, Minister. I'm sorry. We have some work to do for our next panel. Minister, thank you so much for being with us today.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you.

The Chair: I know you're having a busy day; we all are.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes.

The Chair: I'm going to suspend now. We'll need to do some sound checks and have some other business as we prepare for the next round, so we'll suspend for just a few minutes.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1215)

The Chair: We're going to get under way.

Thank you, Mr. van Koeverden, for allowing us some extra time.

We have Anita Anand, Minister of Public Services and Procurement; the Honourable Marc Miller; Associate Deputy Minister Sony Perron; Valerie Gideon, senior assistant deputy minister; Philippe Thompson, chief of finances; Dr. Tom Wong, chief medical officer; and from Public Works, Michael Vandergrift and Ariane Reza.

Mr. Vidal, I'm going to ask you to start. You have six minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate all the challenges in getting through these things, so I'll get right to my questions for Mr. Miller this morning.

Throughout the pandemic, Mr. Miller, in my role as shadow minister, I have had many opportunities to connect with indigenous people across the country—businesses, individuals and organizations.

One of the organizations that I've had the privilege of working with, getting to know and advocating for is the Aboriginal Friendship Centres of Saskatchewan. I am an MP who represents northern Saskatchewan. There are 10 friendship centres in Saskatchewan, and five of them are in my riding. Recently, they released a Saskatchewan economic framework called "Honouring Her Spark". During their engagement as they prepared this report.... Many suggestions in the report respond to the calls for action found in the MMIWG report that we were discussing earlier.

What specific actions is the government taking to help support entrepreneurship among indigenous women, and what effect do you believe this might have on this very important issue that we were talking about in the last hour? I realize that your department is also involved in this—thus, the question.

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Indigenous Services): As you rightly note, Gary....

First, thank you for the advocacy work. I've noted it in prior sessions, but I think it's worth repeating. Your team has been linking up with our department and advocating in very complex situations, particularly what's been going on in La Loche and the response at all levels of government to support...the spread of COVID in northern Saskatchewan.

At the heart of this.... The MMIWG calls to action are not for a federal response only, nor is Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs responsible. It is entirely a whole-of-government, civil society, provincial and territorial response.

Part of the calls to action demand from Indigenous Services Canada, when we look in terms of how the civil service reacts to those calls to action within what Indigenous Services Canada does.... What you're getting at the very heart of that, and what the report highlighted as well, is socio-economic conditions, inequalities that unduly and disproportionately negatively affect women and create the conditions that you've highlighted and that we've heard in testimony.

One of those calls to action included what we have rolled out over the last week, the response in capital funding for shelters that support indigenous women who are fleeing violence. Indeed, during COVID, we've seen a significant increase in domestic violence

and a corresponding need for those supports with regard to the friendship centres and the various service organizations that do an incredible job with very little resources. Our government moved quite quickly with \$50 million, which was wholly inadequate, and then \$75 million, which is in the process of being rolled out specifically to organizations that serve indigenous peoples, among those women and children who are fleeing violence.

Again, it's within the responsibility of Indigenous Services Canada as well as other levels of government, at the federal level and across the spectrum of government services and civil society services in Canada. It's one aspect of it, but it is a very important part to the MMIWG response. It can't simply be a piecemeal approach. It needs to be complete and comprehensive. Supports for women in those situations are key, and Indigenous Services Canada has to do its part.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

I want to get to one more question for you here, as we're obviously working with limited time.

This past week, Dion and I had the privilege of travelling to La Ronge, where we got to engage many important stakeholders on the impact of COVID-19 in that area. While we were there, we were able to observe the fact that they were having a groundbreaking ceremony, or a celebration of the funding that was promised in the election, for this wellness, healing and recovery centre that's been funded on that side. I want to thank you for the commitment to follow through on that.

I also had the opportunity this week to speak to Chief Ronald Mitsuing. You would be very aware of the advocacy he's done through the whole Makwa Sahgaiehcan situation that you came upon, I think, on your first day as the minister and how that all played out.

We've talked a lot about northwestern Saskatchewan with La Loche and with Clearwater River Dene Nation. I'm curious whether the government would be supportive of considering a centre on the west side like it's funding on the east side over in La Ronge. There are obviously great needs for Chief Ronald Mitsuing and many of his colleagues on the west side as well. Is that something you've ever talked about or considered, a similar type of facility on the northwest side of Saskatchewan to help that side of the province as well?

● (1220)

The Chair: You have less than a minute.

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes. It's an excellent point that you raise, because in my discussions with Chief Mitsuing, as you noted, at the very beginning of my mandate, he was facing a crisis within his community, and it is not unique, but communities have unique needs, particularly in mental health. The solutions lie within communities.

I think one of the criticisms we heard from the chief was the challenge with having solutions that are sort of flown in, or even when it comes to tribal councils and the supports that they have, which are very good, the increased needs are financial and also homegrown. The ability to do that can only be done within infrastructure solutions that are always undercapitalized.

I think that's something we've got to take away and keep working on. We have, indeed, done great work in ensuring that the capital is there for services, buildings and infrastructure that can house that increasing pressure, in particular on mental health—

The Chair: Sorry, that's our time. Thank you.

Hon. Marc Miller: I can't make a direct commitment, but I'm glad to keep working on it.

The Chair: Mr. Powlowski, you have six minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Minister, I know that there are a lot of indigenous communities, and your department was trying to help a lot of different communities across Canada rapidly get ready for possible cases of the COVID-19 pandemic. I've been in touch with you about several of these communities, and I'm always really impressed that you seem to know something about, or a lot about, some very small communities. I think that was indicated in your response to Mr. Vidal.

I think this meeting was primarily called in regard to what happened in Mathias Colomb Cree Nation. Could tell us what is being done in order to address the needs of that particular community?

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, and thank you again for your interaction with our department and ensuring that the needs in your riding are met and heard.

We've been working from the get-go at an accelerated rate. Obviously getting ahead of this curve has been the reason indigenous communities have had such optimistic outcomes, because they've been able to predict and communicate, open that line of communication and make sure that procurement is being done in a timely fashion and distributed.

In the case of Mathias Colomb, there were some movable structures that we were looking at essentially as part of a central procurement to deal with surge capacity to have moveable structures that are in great demand for communities that need isolation capacity or more testing capacity, so the company in question proactively released a press release that frankly mis-characterized what was being sent into the community, and the community, rightly so, reacted. Our department apologized for the miscommunication, but it was an issue of communication in coordination with their pandemic plan.

Essentially what Mathias Colomb wanted, which we have funded to the tune of about \$400,000, was repurposing of one of their community centres as part of their pandemic plan and not the movable structures that we were proactively sourcing with a view to distributing them into a variety of communities that have those challenges that have been highlighted to the committee. I think essentially that's the crux of it.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I think, from what I've heard, that the community is quite happy with what's ensued after this initial controversy. Am I not right with that?

Hon. Marc Miller: I believe so.

You know, the frustration that a number of communities feel existed prior to the pandemic, because we're dealing with socio-economic determinants that make that vulnerability more acute. We're asked to do things in Indigenous Services Canada that we don't have to do in non-indigenous communities, because those conditions don't exist, so that frustration is very real. Ensuring that we communicate and essentially deal the cards that we're dealt and proactively source units for isolation and medical purposes actively, knowing that there has not been an outbreak, is very important.

I think always that the line of communication, making sure local needs are addressed, is important [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

• (1225)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Are you still there?

Hon. Marc Miller: —to the community [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I was chief of staff for a couple of years at Norway House in northern Manitoba. What specifically was being done for the communities in Manitoba in order to prepare them for possible outbreaks in those communities?

Hon. Marc Miller: Manitoba first nations have done an exceptional job. We have worked with the regional chief, with Grand Chief Arlen Dumas, to make sure that we are responding to needs—that has been the core of this—and to make sure that they communicate with our regional teams, knowing that we proactively source the surge capacity material and resources, and to be ready to react on a moment's notice. You know, we take nothing for granted. The resourcing and the work that has been done by first nations to have a first nations-led data approach are exemplary across Canada, and so a lot of the credit is, frankly, owed to local leadership. Obviously, there has been some luck—we can't discount that—but they have been proactive and aggressive. It hasn't occurred yet in Manitoba, but those communities across the country that have reacted the best have let, frankly, medical leadership take the front and allow people to communicate so that you have a health response to, really, a health problem.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Mr. Chair, is there any time left?

The Chair: There's a minute left.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I haven't actually prepared further questions. Is the NDP ready to go?

The Chair: We have to save that minute, because we have to vote on a budget item before one o'clock.

We'll move on now to Ms. Michaud.

You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us. I also want to thank the minister for making the effort to respond in French. I'm very grateful to her for this.

I want to address the motion that we're debating today.

Mr. Miller, you didn't get the opportunity to read your opening remarks, but I read them. You admit that your government made a mistake when it failed to share information about the procurement process with community leaders. Mr. Powlowski just discussed this issue.

I want to give you the chance to briefly explain how the process works and why the information wasn't shared with community leaders.

Hon. Marc Miller: Ms. Michaud, I want to start by saying that I'm pleased to be speaking in French, especially since I'm currently in Montreal.

To some extent, what happened was the result of the nature of the beast, if I may say so. We had to deal with a very unpredictable and historic pandemic. We had to take action and be proactive in order to source very expensive products and structures. We needed to develop a plan to deal with the epidemic. The plan wasn't supposed to concern just one province, but the entire country.

Indigenous Services Canada assesses all potential outbreaks and vulnerabilities, such as the remoteness or overcrowding of a community. The important thing was to be proactive.

There's considerable demand for movable structures designed to address overcrowding in some communities, for example.

In the case of the Mathias Colomb Cree Nation, there was an agreement to send movable structures to the community. However, the community didn't want them. Instead, according to its pandemic plan, the community wanted to resupply and restructure its community centre. We did this with a \$400,000 investment. There was a misunderstanding regarding the press release because the company issued the release hastily. The misunderstanding concerned when things would be done and the nature of what would be developed for the community.

Our department apologized to the community. We're continuing to proactively communicate with its members to ensure that the community can meet all its resupply needs.

When we act urgently, we may make mistakes. We must learn from them.

• (1230)

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you.

My next question is for Ms. Anand. It concerns the COVID-19 supply council.

The first news release stated that the group provided advice to the government on the procurement of critical goods and services. Later, when you appeared before the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, you said that the council had no role in procurement.

I want to clarify the situation. What's the role of the COVID-19 supply council?

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of Public Services and Procurement): Thank you for the question.

I'm pleased to be here today.

[English]

Today I would like to that say I'm speaking to you from the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples from Oakville, Ontario.

[Translation]

With regard to your question, the council was established to provide advice on the federal government's work. The initiative seeks to ensure access to personal protective equipment and medical supplies in the context of the pandemic. Council members don't have a role in government procurement.

We've held only two meetings. During these meetings, we discussed a number of things.

[English]

One was the supply hub, which is a list of resources for purchasers and sellers on the Government of Canada's website.

[Translation]

The council doesn't have a role in contracts or discussions regarding contracts.

The things that we discussed today are on our website.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much. That brings us to time.

Ms. Ashton, you are next. You have six minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm pleased we're having this meeting today as a result of the work of my colleague, MP Qaqqaq.

It is a very important meeting, and we need to get answers. Pukatawagan deserves answers.

Pukatawagan, or Mathias Colomb, is a remote first nation here in northern Manitoba. It has done everything in its power to keep its community safe, like many other first nations. In the midst of all of this, through the CBC news, Pukatawagan found out that a company in Newfoundland was making specialized tents for them that they never asked for. Imagine that.

Then they went on to find out, and we all went on to find out, that the chair of the board of the company that made these tents is a former Liberal cabinet minister on the government supply council for COVID-19, so the plot thickens.

The reality is that the excuse that ISC, Indigenous Services Canada, was trying to be proactive doesn't stand up to the test. Pukatawagan deserves answers. How is it that these tents were destined for this first nation when nobody asked for them?

Minister Miller, who in your department made this request on behalf of Pukatawagan? Why was it Pukatawagan and no other first nation, including other remote first nations here in Manitoba or elsewhere?

Hon. Marc Miller: I believe my office has sent you the answer from our department.

We need to understand how surge capacity resourcing works, and as part of that we need to profile and model vulnerable communities. As you have highlighted and as the community has highlighted to our team, it is part of a number of vulnerable communities across Canada that have those vulnerabilities for unacceptable reasons.

As part of that, we need to establish procurement models and resources on a Canada-wide level. Mathias Colomb was named as part of a greater model in trying to understand what the needs would be, not only for the first wave but for a second or third wave. As you've heard in prior testimony but as I'm glad to reiterate, the press release from the company that was selected to provide these units was a little hasty and mischaracterized what these very important units are for, and as a result, the community was surprised.

That is not right, and I'll concede that. They had this pandemic—

• (1235)

Ms. Niki Ashton: If I can stop you there, you're not answering the questions, Mr. Miller.

Your letter in response to our letter did not provide any answers. You referenced first nations and leaders. You referenced.... There were generalities.

The reality is that here in our constituency, there are 21 remote first nations. Pukatawagan is one of them. Why was it Pukatawagan and no other community? Pukatawagan and all communities in our region deserve exact answers. Who made these requests from your department? I'm not interested in explanations about what surge capacity is. I understand. The reality is that Pukatawagan was singled out and, frankly, was used.

Could you please answer me this? Your government, after all of this scandal came out, finally confirmed and agreed to spending \$449,460 to upgrade the youth centre in Pukatawagan as a way of having the community prepared for COVID-19. However, your government preferred to spend almost double that amount, \$766,140.34, on these tents that nobody asked for, from a company that is chaired by a former Liberal cabinet minister.

How is it acceptable that your government benefited a Liberal and only then committed a mere half of the money to a community that's desperate to have the proper infrastructure in place? Does it take a scandal to get even half of the money that your government is committing to live up to the urgent needs of first nations?

Hon. Marc Miller: I submit to you, Ms. Ashton, that this is not how procurement works. We were working with the community already to respond to their pandemic plan. Indeed, were you to ask them, they would say that they are—and I do not purport to speak

for them—quite happy with the result right now, but that was something that was well in the works to the best of my understanding.

Again, the surge capacity nature of the procurement was such that these tents—which are very expensive movable structures with a medical purpose that can be used in many ways—are in very high demand in the communities that need them, which we respond proactively to.

Obviously we have to predict for second and third waves, and that's why that procurement occurs on a national scale. We're glad to work with communities that require any of these. The communities that have used them are quite happy. Obviously they're not happy with the conditions that create the need, but it's something that we need to continue moving forward with, and we will.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Sure. Let me just remind both you and the committee that the chief used the word “paternalism” to describe this announcement. These are very serious words to describe what your government did.

Let's move on to other communities—

The Chair: There's only 10 seconds left, Ms. Ashton. I'm sorry.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'll follow up in the next round. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to a five-minute round, but I'm modifying it because of the problems earlier. Mr. Viersen will be followed by Ms. Bérubé for two and a half minutes. Mr. Zimmer will be followed by Ms. Qaqqaq, and then we will wrap up the meeting with a vote with regard to our budget.

Mr. Viersen, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our guests and witnesses for being here today.

Minister Anand, the last time we spoke I was asking you about procurement and whether indigenous companies were able to bid on these contracts and whether any indigenous companies had been awarded contracts for PPE with the federal government. I was wondering if you could give us an update on that situation.

• (1240)

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you so much for asking me that question again, because in that format we don't have a large opportunity to have an interchange.

As you know, PSPC is very committed to collaborating with indigenous suppliers. We have awarded 12 contracts to 10 indigenous businesses, for a total amount of about \$40 million at the current time. In addition, I am very much advocating open competitions or RFP processes in which we can specifically target indigenous businesses, and in that vein, we actually have launched an RFP process for the production of cloth masks. This is targeted specifically to indigenous businesses.

The answer to the question is yes. We are definitely encouraging indigenous businesses and attempting to ensure that indigenous businesses are participating in the procurement process.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Minister, how many employees does your department have?

Hon. Anita Anand: My department has many, in the thousands. I will turn it over to Arianne Reza, who will respond to that question.

Ms. Arianne Reza (Assistant Deputy Minister, Procurement, Department of Public Works and Government Services): PSPC has approximately 12,000 employees.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Minister, were you aware that there was an online trivia game hosted by your department on Wednesday for your employees as a morale-building exercise?

Hon. Anita Anand: I was not aware of that. As you know, the department is run by the deputy minister, Mr. Bill Matthews.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Could you find out for me what that morale-building exercise cost? There are 12,000 employees at PSPC, and there were 400 participants. You can view the video online on YouTube. I'm also wondering if that was a sole-source contract.

Do you think this is a good use of taxpayers' money during a pandemic, when many Canadians are losing their jobs?

Hon. Anita Anand: I will get back to you on that.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Minister, do you know how many contracts we have signed for masks throughout this pandemic?

Hon. Anita Anand: We have signed hundreds of contracts, both domestically and internationally, for PPE. Many of those are for masks, as you know, such as surgical masks, cloth masks and N95 masks. We're dealing with multiple different types of masks.

I will ask Arianne Reza, who is in charge of many of these contracts in our department, to speak to your question as well.

Ms. Arianne Reza: We have bought many masks to meet the front-line needs of health care workers, including a range of N95 masks, surgical masks, non-medical masks and disposable masks.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Minister, there have been reports of contaminated masks, and it seems that they've been diverted from the medical field to other communities. Have any of these contaminated masks ended up in first nation communities?

Hon. Anita Anand: You are correct that we attempt to repurpose masks and we have done so. None of these have been diverted to indigenous communities.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Do you know what company has been supplying us with the contaminated masks?

Hon. Anita Anand: I believe the masks you're referring to did not meet the specifications of the Public Health Agency of Canada. However, they can be used in other sectors. Given the negotiations with the supplier at the current time, it would be prudent for us not to disclose the particulars of that negotiation.

• (1245)

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Viersen, but that brings us to the end of your time.

Madam Bérubé, you have the floor for two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Minister Miller.

Mr. Miller, in 2018, the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission published a document stating that many grey areas remained with regard to jurisdictions related to first nations health care.

What do you think of the idea of clarifying the legal framework governing the public health practice in non-treaty first nations communities?

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, Ms. Bérubé.

This issue affects not only health care, but also a number of other areas. When we look at the Constitution, the areas of jurisdiction and the method of providing social services—and crucial medical assistance—we sometimes see an overlap, but also occasionally shortcomings.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, despite efforts to leave no one behind, we sometimes saw a gap in access, particularly to personal protective equipment and nursing care. This is the responsibility of the federal crown, but also the provincial crown. It's a challenge, I'll give you that.

Take the example of a situation outside Quebec. In La Loche, Saskatchewan, the department proactively responded to the pandemic. A large proportion, or 90%, of the community members are indigenous people. However, the village isn't a reserve. Of course, the community had to coordinate efforts with the province and the surrounding Dene communities.

Rather than conflict, I prefer to speak about co-operation. We must co-operate, despite the philosophical discrepancies and differences that exist in the relationships with the provinces and territories. This is about the health of people living in Canada.

I partly agree with you. However, the lesson that I'm learning from this situation is that we need to better coordinate our efforts to provide the proper health care services that everyone should receive.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Do you think that the idea of—

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our modified round of questioning now moves back to Mr. Zimmer for his five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you again to Minister Miller and our procurement minister.

I want to first of all thank Minister Miller for some of the issues he's been involved with in helping northern B.C. I want to recognize your efforts there, Minister, and thank you for being a good person to contact and follow up.

I want to ask a question about PPE to the procurement minister. We've heard from many communities, especially our indigenous communities—and I have an example of one just north of my hometown—that they were left scrambling, once they had a few COVID cases, for things like masks, hand sanitizer and the like.

Members of the community had also understood that there was an emergency stockpile that they were to have access to, but it simply wasn't available when they needed it.

Do you acknowledge that there were shortages of PPE during the pandemic?

Hon. Anita Anand: The pandemic has seen an unparalleled growth in demand for PPE across the country and this world. We have been working extremely hard, and successfully so, at sourcing PPE.

I believe you're referring to the national emergency stockpile. It contains a set-aside for indigenous communities.

All of our procurement for the health sector has been on the basis of requests that have come from the Public Health Agency of Canada. I believe Minister Miller could speak to the large numbers of PPE that have been delivered to indigenous communities.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Go ahead, Minister Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: From the get-go, the challenge of getting personal protective equipment into communities—we had our own stockpile—had to do with logistics and in ensuring we had that link within communities and understood the needs and what the nursing stations needed.

The department has been pretty proactive and has been moving from a slower response time to a much quicker one. Clearly, communities have specific needs, and it takes work.

Have we experienced shortages? I would have to speak to my team about that, but generally, the response rate has been pretty quick. Where there have been misunderstandings, it has always been in the haste of trying to get things out and figuring it out afterward. I wouldn't qualify any challenges we've had as specifically related to indigenous communities, other than remoteness, but clearly this is something we're conscious of.

• (1250)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Sorry, Minister Miller, for interrupting, but I have just a limited amount of time.

I understand that is an answer from your perspective in Ottawa, and maybe the ministry has said to you that this was all available and that it was accessible, etc., but the reality on the ground was that it wasn't.

My question, as a follow-up, is a difficult one if it's currently understood that everything was going fine or has functioned fine with COVID: What is being done to correct those lag times in getting supplies?

As an example, a reserve in my community was needing supplies. Simply, they were scrambling and going to Walmart. I was even helping with some of the supplies and getting some of them at Walmart and different grocery stores to try to address the problem.

If that's the reality on the ground, what is being done so that doesn't happen again?

I think it goes back to what Minister Anand said about the NESS, the national emergency strategic stockpile. "Strategic" would mean that all these stockpiles of PPE are located in areas where they're accessible within a few hours, I would guess. If it isn't that way now, what is being done so that is the way it will be in the future?

The Chair: You have 35 seconds.

Hon. Anita Anand: I could speak to that.

I am regularly in contact with my counterparts in procurement across the provinces and territories. In one of our meetings, the procurement minister in Nunavut said that Nunavut needed swabs, and we had swabs to Nunavut in 24 hours, so I—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Clearly there have been a lot of success stories, but I'm talking about the stories about not having access to PPE. Those are the questions that I think need to be answered even more.

Hon. Anita Anand: Minister Hajdu—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: The problem didn't exist—I get that—but where the problem did exist, we need to answer that and get the supplies to those places.

Hon. Anita Anand: I agree. I'm sure my colleague Minister Miller agrees also.

I will say that Minister Hajdu, who is in charge of the Public Health Agency of Canada, or it's under her purview, has said that she will review the mandate of the national stockpile, as it was never designed for a pandemic of this nature.

We agree with you that we need to make sure we have efficiencies in the distribution of PPE.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Qaqqaq, you have, to conclude our modified round, two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: Thank you. *Matna*, Chair.

I'll start by saying that we are starting this late because we were still waiting on the ministers to come on, knowing full well we've been doing this for a number of weeks. We know how a sound check works. This is why we get online a half an hour before. These are very important questions to be answered. Exactly as has been said, we are looking at what needs to change and where we need to make improvements, where the Liberal government needs to make improvements.

I don't think it's fully appreciated what impression indigenous communities get when a Liberal insider is given a contract, yet so many of our basic requests go unanswered. Nunavut has only seven ventilators. We have valid testing in only two of the 25 communities. We don't have enough clean water. Tuberculosis is still rampant, and there are so many other things.

If SARS, H1N1 and COVID-19 aren't the right time to act on long-term investments for people, then when is the right time?

Minister Miller, I'll start there.

Hon. Marc Miller: MP Qaqqaq, I will be very short with that. I will simply say that I agree with your statement. I think we need to take a really sober look at the needs, going forward, as to what the new normal is in massive infrastructure investments when we look at overcrowding.

Sure, I could tell you about the investments that the government has made since 2015, but you probably don't want to hear that, because that isn't the situation in communities that have overpopulation, which makes them more susceptible to tuberculosis. Those rates are unacceptable anywhere in the world, let alone in one of the best countries in the world. I think you're absolutely right in your observation.

I would simply say, in response to the point about a Liberal insider, that I have no knowledge of this person and I don't believe this person had any influence in any form of decision-making at all. I would just simply leave it at that, because I think your first point was exceedingly important.

• (1255)

Ms. Mumilaq Qaqqaq: I think that's very interesting, considering my colleague had just given us a concrete example of the types of scandals that we do see all too often in our communities.

I know I'm running out of time, Chair, but I think it's incredibly important that ministers aren't only here to speak on things—we see a constant lack of action—but to be on time and to be respectful. We are here for our constituents, trying to do a job, and we have been prevented from doing that to the best of our abilities simply because of time management issues.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Qaqqaq, and thanks to our ministers—

Ms. Niki Ashton: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. This motion has been on the table for weeks now. We've known about this meet-

ing since mid-week this week. The minister was almost 15 minutes late in attending this meeting, and it has cut into our question time. I think this is completely unacceptable. I know MP van Koeverden suggested sharing his time, which was much appreciated, but the fact is that this is of no fault of our own and something that plainly could have been avoided. This is unacceptable.

Can we extend the time? Can we have the minister come back at another time? Truly, this has meant that the minister has not been here to answer the tough questions that he should be answering.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Mr. Chair, if I may speak to that point of order, I completely appreciate Ms. Qaqqaq's point and Ms. Ashton's.

The issue is that Mr. Miller was on the call at 12 o'clock, but there were technical issues that prevented him from coming on. That is a system problem and not a problem of the minister being delayed. He was here on time, for the record. It was the connection that took that long.

In spite of that, I believe, from the government side, we've given up our time to ensure that in the normal course of an hour, the time that the NDP would have had was satisfied, as well as the time for the Bloc. I do think we've acted in fairness, and I do believe that we've fulfilled the requirements of the motion.

The Chair: Thanks. That was the point of modifying it, so that the opposition members would get their proper time, which they did get, so we will stop it there.

Thanks to everyone who attended today.

Now I have a motion to adopt the study budget. This will be a recorded vote.

Members, please pay attention now. I put the motion forward to you that a proposed budget in the amount of \$4,000 for the study of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic be adopted.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 10; nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

• (1300)

The Chair: We have now paid off the costs of operating our COVID-19 response. Thank you very much to all.

We'll be in touch off-line via email with regard to issues coming forward, but at this time I want to once again thank all of our committee members for their work today. I thought it was really well done. I also thank our staff, our clerk, our analysts and all the people who support us.

The technical side is a very difficult thing, but we still need to at least train ourselves as to the proper and most efficient way of doing this. My technical apex was the steam locomotive, but I'm doing it, so everyone else should be able to manage the technical issues. Hopefully that will be cleaned up for the next time.

That ends our meeting for today. This meeting is now adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>