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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina



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• (1830)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): I call this meeting of the indigenous and northern affairs committee to order.

We will start with the acknowledgement, of course. We meet in Ottawa on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin people. However, as you can see in the grid, we have many nations represented. Here, where I am, are the Anishinabe, Haudenosaunee and Chonnonton first nations.

To ensure an orderly meeting, remember to speak and listen in the official language of your choice by selecting the interpretation within the globe at the bottom centre of the screen. When speaking, please do so slowly and clearly. You should be on mute when you are not speaking.

Joining us today, by video conference, for the first hour are Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations Carolyn Bennett and Minister of Northern Affairs Dan Vandal. They are accompanied by the following senior officials: Daniel Quan-Watson, deputy minister; Paula Isaak, associate deputy minister; Serge Beaudoin, assistant deputy minister; Mary-Luisa Kapelus, senior assistant deputy minister; and Annie Boudreau, chief finances results and delivery officer.

Welcome to everyone. We have a really important meeting and a tight timeline. I'm going to ask the ministers to give opening comments for up to six minutes each before we proceed with questions.

Minister Bennett, would you please go ahead, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations): *Kwe kwe, unnusakkut, tansi, hello, bonjour.*

I am speaking to you today from the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. I wish to honour the waters they paddled and their moccasins, which walked these lands.

Mr. Chair, it is an honour to appear again before this committee today, to discuss my department's supplementary estimates (C), as well as its 2021-22 main estimates.

I am appearing with my colleague the Minister of Northern Affairs, and supported by our officials, led by Deputy Minister Daniel Quan-Watson.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges to everyone in Canada, especially people living in first nations, Inuit and Métis

communities. The priority of indigenous leadership has been to keep their people safe.

[*English*]

From the very beginning, our government has been there to support first nations, Inuit and Métis communities through the fight against COVID-19, with daily calls with the three ministers. We are so grateful for the truly amazing public servants who are working 24-7. We'll be there as we work towards the recovery and building back better—socially, economically and environmentally.

Reconciliation and self-determination are essential to a strong recovery and represent the core of my mandate. No one wants to go back to normal. We now have the opportunity to bring all Canadians with us as we accelerate the progress to self-determination and support indigenous communities as they implement their own visions for the future.

Our commitment to advancing reconciliation and accelerating self-determination is reflected not only in the estimates being considered today but in everything we do on a day-to-day basis. The 2020-21 supplementary estimates (C) reflect a net increase of \$138.6 million for CIRNAC, which brings the total budgetary authorities for 2020-21 to \$6.9 billion.

Some of the key priorities that funding from the supplementary estimates (C) will support include the implementation of the Métis government recognition and self-government agreements, the implementation of Canada's collaborative self-government fiscal policy, engagement to support the introduction of Bill C-15 and the co-ordination and implementation of the national action plan on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, two-spirit and LGBTQIA+ people.

Notably, the \$35.6 million to implement the Métis government recognition and self-government agreements signed with the Métis Nation of Ontario, the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, and the Métis Nation of Alberta will support their visions of self-determination and their ability to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural development. The \$8.2 million for fiscal transfer agreements with self-governing indigenous governments will support ongoing funding to these governments, as well as enforcement activities under the Teslin Tlingit Council Administration of Justice Agreement.

In addition, \$5.2 million is assigned to support the engagement process of Bill C-15. The current version of the bill, built on the momentum and support from indigenous groups for the former private member's bill of Romeo Saganash, Bill C-262, is a reflection of our ongoing engagement with indigenous partners. Moving forward on Bill C-15 is the right thing to do, and I look forward to working closely with all of you during your examination of the bill over the next few weeks and on potential further improvements to the bill. We are grateful for your prestudy.

The funding of \$2.6 million over three years for missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, two-spirit and LGBTQIA+ people will help ensure that survivors and family members can continue to meaningfully participate in the development and ongoing implementation of the national action plan. The MMIWG secretariat, led out of CIRNAC, will provide support to the national family and survivors circle to ensure that it is included, supported and connected with all the working groups and at the very centre of the process.

The 2021-22 main estimates for Crown-Indigenous Relations will be approximately \$4.7 billion. While this reflects a net decrease of \$189 million, or 4%, compared with last year's main estimates, this is mainly due to the anticipated settlement of claims. Also, as you know, main estimates do not reflect the additional funding made available throughout the year through the supplementary estimates and cannot ever be viewed as a complete picture of intended spending.

In closing, I know you all agree that the top priority of this government during this difficult time has been the safety and physical and mental health of all Canadians, including first nations, Inuit and Métis people and especially their elders. I'm proud that even in these extraordinary times, our government has continued to advance reconciliation, right wrongs and accelerate self-determination for indigenous peoples in Canada.

Meegwetch. Qujannamiik. Marci. Thank you.

● (1835)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Minister Vandal, go ahead for six minutes please.

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

Tansi. Boozhoo. Greetings and hello.

[*Translation*]

I want to begin by acknowledging that I am speaking with you today from my office in Saint Boniface—Saint Vital, Treaty 1 territory, the traditional territory of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples, the homeland of the Métis nation, and a city that many Inuit call home.

I am proud to join you virtually today, alongside Minister Bennett, to speak about the 2020-21 supplementary estimates (C) and the 2021-22 main estimates, and what the Government of Canada is doing to assist first nations, Inuit and Métis in Canada, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[*English*]

The unique needs of indigenous people and northerners present their own challenges in these COVID times. While the pandemic is certainly not over, there is hope down the way.

I thank you for this opportunity to discuss the important work we are doing to confront the COVID-19 situation and to mitigate its impacts in the north, as well as to answer your questions on supplementary estimates (C) and the main estimates.

These estimates reflect our government's commitment to creating greater economic opportunity and supporting a higher quality of life in Canada's north and Arctic. Furthermore, these estimates demonstrate our government's firm intention to continue working to renew our relationship with indigenous peoples, to tackle climate change and its impacts, to promote economic development and economic growth for northern communities, and to create quality jobs for the people of the north and the Arctic.

Growing the economy while protecting the environment and addressing climate change is a priority for our government. Despite the challenges we all faced in 2020, it was still a year of progress and successes.

In November, with the Government of Yukon, we introduced the COVID-19 recovery research program. As I reported to the committee in November, northerners should not have to worry about putting food on their table or ensuring a continued supply of essential items. Our government provided an additional investment of \$25 million to nutrition north Canada. We've also introduced the new harvesters support grant, which is increasing northerners' access to country foods by providing funding to support traditional hunting, harvesting and food sharing. We also marked the formation of the task force on post-secondary education in the north.

The supplementary estimates (C) reflects a net increase of \$138.6 million for CIRNAC, including \$120.9 million in new funding and \$17.7 million of net transfers with other government departments. The total budgetary authorities for 2020 will be \$6.9 billion.

More specifically, as announced in the 2020 fall economic statement, \$64.7 million is allotted to funding for northern supports to territorial governments to support steps taken to respond to the pandemic. This initiative will contribute to ensuring that territorial governments have the capacity and the resources required to enforce preventative measures and to afford medical options to limit the spread of COVID-19, address regional challenges related to the pandemic and take immediate action to protect health and safety.

• (1840)

[*Translation*]

CIRNAC's 2020-21 main estimates will be approximately \$4.7 billion. This reflects a net decrease of \$189 million, compared to last year's main estimates, which my colleague Minister Bennett spoke to.

While there was an overall decrease in these main estimates, they also reflect increases in support of key initiatives, such as the northern abandoned mine reclamation program, which is building a better future for Canada's north by addressing federal contaminated sites.

The government's main objective is to provide support to help curb the spread of COVID-19 and ensure that communities are supported throughout the pandemic. We will continue to work with our territorial and indigenous partners to ensure that all remote and northern communities are protected and are in a strong position to recover when we can safely.

[*English*]

I want to take a moment of course to acknowledge the hard work of territorial and indigenous partners, public health officials and frontline workers who have done an incredible job of distributing and administering vaccines across the north.

Last week, eligibility opened up for every northerner in the territories over the age of 18, which is only four months after the first shipments arrived in Canada. I think we can all acknowledge the significance of this milestone, but we know there's still much more work to do.

Again, I want to thank you for this opportunity to speak to you. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Minister, thank you very much.

Thank you, Minister Bennett.

We go to a six-minute round of questioning now. I have on my list Mr. Schmale, Mr. van Koeverden, Madame Bérubé and Ms. Blaney.

Jamie Schmale, please go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and good evening to our witnesses.

I'll start with Minister Bennett, if possible.

Minister, I'd like to talk to you about the McGillis family and the Yekau Lake lawsuit settlement.

Minister, as you know, my predecessor, Cathy McLeod, sent you a letter on December 4 regarding the McGillis family. As you may

recall, the McGillis family are certificate holders on the Yekau Lake settlement agreement. That's an agreement that was signed by you to settle the Yekau Lake bombing range matter. It's also an agreement that the McGillis family was not consulted on. Your response was to send the court's verdict.

With respect to your response, Minister, how could the federal Crown in 2015 say to the Federal Court in the Mohawks litigation that the band has no right to claim or collect damages to reserve lands covered by a certificate of possession, and then take the opposite position, inconsistent with the case law before Justice Strickland, in 2020?

• (1845)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thanks so much, Jamie.

I would love to have the opportunity to explain how these things work. It means that the negotiations are undertaken in a confidential and privileged way, without prejudice, based on Canada's negotiation with the chief and council that represent the community.

Canada encouraged at the time the discussions between the Enoch Cree Nation and the certificate of possession holders to resolve their internal issues. As was outlined in the response, like all members of the Enoch Cree Nation, they were privy to all of the information shared with them by the chief and council during the negotiation process. They had the right to participate in the community's ratification process and to cast their vote for or against the agreement.

Obviously, the community voted for the agreement, so the Federal Court decision was attached to the response in order to clarify in detail that the settlement between Canada and the Enoch Cree Nation could not preclude the McGillis family's action from proceeding. They have that right, but in its decision, the court found that preventing the settlement and, therefore, delaying compensation to all the Enoch Cree members, collectively and individually, would not be in the public interest.

As is their right, the plaintiffs have appealed the Federal Court decision. In response, we noted that the Federal Court's decision was clear and left no legal impediment to Canada's ratifying of the settlement agreement. Ratifying the settlement and paying the compensation was the right thing to do.

I know, because it's still before the court, I'm not able to meet with them. I'm not sure if Deputy Quan-Watson has anything additional to add.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Maybe I'll ask the deputy in the second part.

I guess what I'm also asking is given that the McGillis family are an indigenous family and they are certificate holders of the land, obviously, they are a bit upset and concerned. They feel that they were not consulted on this and they also feel that the order in council was rushed through. Can you explain that hurry?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson (Deputy Minister, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs): Thank you for the question.

These actions go back to the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. The government has admitted having done wrong in those instances. I think that, 70 or 80 years after the facts occurred, it's difficult to say that we were rushing. I think the first nation argued for a long time that we dragged our feet for too long.

The compensation that was offered under this deal is one.... It's clear that there needs to be parts set aside in case there are other claims against it.

I would note that this is the type of claim that, because of the passage of time, if it hadn't been for the specific claims policy, it probably would have been impossible for individuals to bring it forward. The existence of the policy, the negotiations, meant we were able to recognize and pay compensation where we would not otherwise have been able to do it. We did not penalize the community as a whole because of this appeal, recognizing in particular that if there were an issue between the family and the community, it could be dealt with in the courts and that there would be money available to have that addressed.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you.

I want to switch gears here.

In response to COVID-19, the financial management board drew upon its capacity to understand and analyze financial statements to qualify the \$1.9-billion impact that the pandemic is having on own-source revenues of first nations across Canada. Now, after issuing this revenue research report in October, the government committed in the fall economic statement to \$332.8 million to support first nations, Inuit and Métis communities in 2021-22 to offset declines in OSR and to help ensure that these communities continue to provide the same level of service that their members demand.

Minister, from what we've been hearing, I understand that the money is not flowing. With time ticking, is there a plan to get this money out this year?

• (1850)

The Chair: Time is ticking. You have 20 seconds.

Please go ahead.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: There's no question that we've heard from many nations about the problem with own-source revenue through this. That's why, in terms of indigenous businesses and so many other supports that we've put in place, we know we will have to do more, as that really has impacted the kinds of services that nations have been able to deliver.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Minister and Jamie.

We will go on to Adam van Koeverden.

You have six minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm joining today from the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, the Huron-Wendat, the Anishinabe, the Attawandaron and more recently the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, as well as many others. I'm very grateful to be joining you here and talking about these important issues.

Speaking of important issues, I'm a strong believer that Bill C-15, on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, is some of the most important work we'll be doing on this committee.

Minister Bennett, I know you'll be coming back next month to discuss Bill C-15 and how important it is with us. The supplementary estimates include additional funding for that bill.

I am hoping you could give us a sense of the engagement that the government has done to develop the bill. It's been a hot topic of discussion among us, particularly with our indigenous partners. Give us a bit of a prelude for Bill C-15, if you could.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thanks for the question.

For all of those who have been fighting to have Canada formally acknowledge the important work of so many Canadians, like Grand Chief Willie Littlechild, at the UN for so long, I think this is an exciting time to have it declared and to supplement the understanding of section 35 rights, and to have that clarity that allows people to go forward.

We know that Romeo Saganash's Bill C-262 went through the full parliamentary process and was passed in the House of Commons. It was stalled in the Senate.

I think the kinds of engagements that Minister Lametti has undertaken have been extraordinary. There were over 70 virtual sessions. There were so many bilateral sessions with national indigenous organizations.

Particularly—Adam, you would love this—with young indigenous law students and the young indigenous leaders, they took what is a static declaration and improved the legislation so that two-spirited people and gender-diverse people, the diversity within indigenous communities here in Canada, are now reflected in both the preamble and in the body of the bill.

We've ended up with a better bill. We will continue to do the work. Then we will have to have three years to develop a serious action plan to make sure that all the laws of Canada are in keeping with that bill.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: We are all very grateful for that work and consultation.

On the theme of consultation, Bill C-15 requires that the designated minister “must, in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous peoples and with other federal ministers, prepare and implement an action plan to achieve the objectives of the Declaration.”

This has come up quite a few times at this committee and I've heard it discussed as well. Is this just a statement, or will action come out of it? I think this committee would really benefit from your sentiments and thoughts on what this government bill would produce in terms of action and on the process, preparation and implementation of that action plan.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Again, we will obviously need to work in close partnership with our first nations, Inuit and Métis partners, particularly on what needs to happen in all the bills across Canada. What are the priorities? What changes need to be there?

It's not quite the same as the same-sex benefits, which is sort of where we find something across all the bills and just replace it. This is going to be significant and about what the priorities are. However, it also means that various regions.... I know that Regional Chief Adamek in the Yukon wants to do a much deeper dive, not only into the bill but into the implementation plan, to see how they would affect her region. We are helping and supporting that kind of work coast to coast to coast.

• (1855)

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you. That is super helpful and very insightful.

Let's change the subject a bit, toward the collaborative self-government fiscal policy. Your reflections on this are in your opening statement.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The collaborative fiscal policy is one of the most extraordinary things we've been able to do as a government. We are working with all of the self-governing nations, so they can develop the fiscal model they will need to run their own governments. It has been extraordinary to see that work done in a collaborative way. We came up with the funding model together. Most of them are now receiving more than three times what they would have gotten under the Indian Act.

A tremendous collaboration also happened as we watched these self-governing nations work in collaboration with one another throughout COVID, setting priorities that help one another, and as they moved toward their new proposal around infrastructure, which is exciting.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thanks, Minister Bennett.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. van Koeverden.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Bérubé, you have the floor.

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

I represent the Cree and Anishinabe territory of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou.

My question is for Minister Bennett.

We always talk about violence against indigenous women and girls. Unfortunately, this is an ongoing problem. In 2019, the government indicated that it had a national plan for missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and that it would be released by June 2020. However, in May 2020, the government indefinitely delayed the release of the national action plan because of the pandemic.

Please tell me about the progress that has been made on the national action plan since June 2020.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As always, our hearts go out to the survivors and families touched by the national inquiry into missing

and murdered indigenous women and girls, two-spirit and LGBTQQIA people.

In response to the first-ever national inquiry into this tragedy, our government worked with the provinces, territories, partners, indigenous governments, and victims and their families to develop a national action plan and a clear roadmap to ensure the safety of indigenous women, girls, two-spirit and LGBTQQIA people, both in their communities and in our cities as a whole.

We now have sub-working groups, all led by indigenous women. More than 100 women are participating in sub-working groups, including on the urban environment, on two-spirit people, on data, on first nations, on Inuit and on Métis. There is also the National Family and Survivors Circle. All sub-working groups work together and the leaders of each sub-working group report their work to the umbrella group. The Yukon government has already shared its work. It's a good example for all the provinces and territories.

I think it's an effective plan. In addition, it provides for the responsibility over the coming years to continually measure results and adapt the process accordingly.

• (1900)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Can you tell me what impact the delay of releasing the national action plan will have on indigenous women and girls?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I hope it will improve relations. As the case of Joyce Echaquan showed, it will take change in all of our institutions, addressing systemic racism and taking an approach that will allow all Canadians to see the role they can play in reconciliation and ensuring the safety of indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people. It is a shared responsibility.

Last week, I had a good discussion with the Quebec minister responsible for indigenous affairs, Ian Lafrenière. In the wake of the Vienna conference, these are recommendations and calls for justice. Together, they are a good plan for Quebec, but also for Canada as a whole.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: When do you expect the national action plan on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls to be released?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The National Family and Survivors Circle would like to see a simpler version of the calls for justice. This is necessary for the average person. They have a right to expect to live in safety.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thanks very much.

That brings us to our next round of questions with Rachel Blaney.

Rachel, go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair.

Thank you to both of you, Ministers, and to your staff for being here today with us.

My first question is for Minister Vandal.

We are doing another study. I would hate to count how many studies we've done on food security in the north, but we're doing another one. Hopefully, this one will actually see some action in the future.

President Obed from ITK said, "The primary issue is the purpose of the program", and I'm talking about nutrition north. If the purpose of the program is that it's a social program, with 100% of the money going to the people who need it, then we need a program that is completely transparent and accountable.

A point-of-sale rebate is a marketing tool, but it is not an effective mechanism in the way it is being used. Until we fix the systemic problems that leave the nutrition north program open to interpretation, I think people will continue to say it isn't working for them and they will demand a better nutrition north program.

We're hearing loud and clear from people—and all the testimony we've heard in the last two weeks has been very, very clear—that the program is still not working. People are still struggling to get appropriate nutrition, especially indigenous communities.

In the supplementary estimates, of course, you have announced that there are more resources, but I'm wondering if there is any practice or investment that is going to look at the program, assess it and maybe make it more of a social program that actually reflects the needs of the people in those communities.

• (1905)

Hon. Dan Vandal: Thank you so much.

That's an important question, so thanks for asking it. I get a lot of questions and feedback about that program.

First of all, the whole issue of food insecurity is a lot more complex and multi-faceted than one program. Nutrition north, for those who don't know, helps make nutritious foods more affordable and accessible to residents who are isolated in northern communities if they lack year-round road, rail or marine access.

For several years the government has championed the nutrition north program. There is a nutrition north advisory committee, which meets regularly to discuss these issues and discuss how the program could be made into a better program. On its own, I think it's a valuable program that subsidizes nutritious food—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sorry to interrupt you, Minister.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Okay.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It's not a social program. The committee is well aware of the program. As I said, we're doing a study on it, so we've heard a lot.

I think the particular challenge is that it's still point-of-sale and it doesn't put the power into the hands of people who are purchasing. It puts the power into the hands of people who are selling. It's not a social program. It's not giving to the people who have the least, so there's definitely a concern there.

I'm just wondering if you will be reviewing your program at all. Are there any funds being dedicated to meaningfully review this program so that it works more beneficially?

Hon. Dan Vandal: Absolutely. We are constantly reviewing the programs we roll out. I've referenced the nutrition north advisory committee. That is always reviewing what we're doing. I think it's important to note that the—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay, but there's no commitment to overhaul the program at all.

Hon. Dan Vandal: —the Auditor General, as well, is reviewing nutrition north. There are improvements. The harvesters support grant is something that came out of the co-development between the advisory committee, ITK and the people who operate nutrition north.

As you know, the harvesters support program is creative. It's a subsidy for Inuit nations and indigenous nations to get back on the land and to have access to more country food, which has long been called for. There's room for improvements—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think the other challenge, Minister, as you well know, is the impact that climate change is having, and how people want to be out there in the country but are not able to.

Thank you so much for answering that.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Absolutely.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I want to move to Minister Bennett now.

I appreciate the conversation earlier about Bill C-15. I very much encourage you to talk to your government and to make sure we actually see it being debated in the House. We saw what happened in the last Parliament. I certainly don't want to see that happen again. It needs to be debated. I appreciate that the committee is doing the prestudy, but if we're not debating it in the House, the process isn't happening so I encourage you to do that.

One of the questions I have for you around reconciliation is on the issue—and you and I have talked about this, Carolyn—of enforcement. We heard in the last study we did about the impacts of COVID-19 on indigenous communities that one of the biggest challenges was their inability to enforce the band bylaws. They weren't able to call somebody when people were gathering in bigger groups. We've heard again and again in different studies that enforcement continues to be a challenge. Local police or the RCMP don't know how to follow through on certain things. There seems to be a disconnect between the governance structures and the local law enforcement, and that's continuing to bring up big issues.

I'm just wondering if there's any commitment from your government to help bridge that gap so that we can see more reconciliation.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thanks so much.

As you know, Minister Blair and Minister Miller are working on making indigenous policing an essential service. In nations like Kwanlin Dün, with Chief Doris Bill and having the four peace officers, the calls to the RCMP have dropped by 30% or 40%. These models of autonomy in community safety are where I think we want to be very supportive.

• (1910)

The Chair: Thanks very much, Minister.

We go to a five-minute question with Mr. Melillo.

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

Minister Vandal, I have a Globe and Mail article in front of me from a couple of weeks ago and obviously I won't read the whole thing, but the headline is "Top defence official says China is a threat to Canadian Arctic". It goes on to talk about China's push for natural resources and that they have been turning their attention to the Northwest Passage for some time.

Minister, we know there is depleting defence infrastructure in the north and that many individuals and organizations have been raising concerns about the Chinese Communist Party for years. Why has there been such little urgency from your government in securing our Arctic sovereignty?

Hon. Dan Vandal: I certainly wouldn't agree with that statement. I agree with the reality of climate change, and climate change is occurring three times faster in the north than it is in the south. That's a very important factor. I think that's reality and we are a government that acknowledges reality.

First of all, I don't agree with the premise of your question. Our government is taking a whole-of-government approach to issues of the north because they are so very important. Whether it's northern affairs or foreign affairs or national defence, we are actively engaged and consulting with Inuit nations that live in the north, and we are taking a whole-of-government approach to the many important issues that face the north. We are working through the Arctic and northern policy framework to align all the territories, the indigenous nations and the investments that are occurring in the north.

You're right. Those issues are so very important, whether it's the Chinese, the Russians or other Arctic nations. We're actively engaged as well with the Arctic Council who are talking about all of these important issues.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you. I appreciate that. I do have limited time, as you know, so I'd like to get to some other issues as well.

I would like to pick up on the issue of food security. It seems that a recurring theme with this government is that you increase funding and you spend a lot of money, but there are worse outcomes for Canadians. I think the nutrition north Canada program is a pretty solid example of that. We've seen funding continue to increase under this government. However, according to Library of Parliament research, rates of food insecurity across the north have continued to increase.

With that in mind, considering you're spending more and getting worse results when it comes to food security, would you agree that

the current policies of this government have failed to address food insecurity?

Hon. Dan Vandal: I absolutely disagree with that. First of all, nutrition north is an important program, but I think the premise that we're going to solve all the food insecurity issues in Canada and in the north through one program is faulty. Nutrition north has been around for 11 or 12 years now. We've invested in it because I think it's a good program. Is there room for improvement? Absolutely.

We are working with the nutrition north advisory council, with ITK and other indigenous nations and territories to try to expand on it. I think it was absolutely necessary that we spend an extra \$25 million during the pandemic to make sure that the people who are suffering from food insecurity have more resources. I'm certainly not going to apologize for spending more money on nutrition north during COVID-19. That was something that was absolutely necessary. It had to be done.

There's room for improvement, and we're going to work with the advisory council.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you.

Minister, how do you measure the success of the nutrition north program? You're saying you disagree with my premise. You believe things are going well, and it's a success. Food insecurity is rising. That's a fact. That's not me telling you this; it's the Library of Parliament research.

How would you measure the success of the nutrition north program?

• (1915)

Hon. Dan Vandal: I think nutrition north is a part of the solution. It's certainly not the entire solution. We have to look at other Government of Canada initiatives such as what Agriculture is doing. CanNor, I understand, are—

Mr. Eric Melillo: I appreciate that, Minister. Is there a way that you measure the success of the nutrition north program specifically?

Hon. Dan Vandal: We have to work with other territorial governments and with indigenous nations to make sure the money in nutrition north is going where it's supposed to, that we're getting the best bang for the dollar, and I think we have to keep improving by working with the nutrition north Canada advisory council. Programs—

The Chair: Thank you. We're out of time.

We move to Brenda Shanahan.

Welcome to the committee, Brenda. You have five minutes.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

It's a privilege to be here on this committee tonight and to be able to address some questions. Certainly, I'm learning at the same time.

I have a couple of questions for Minister Vandal, but first of all, it's very exciting to learn about the vaccine rollout in the north in those northern communities where there are now vaccinations for the entire adult population. Can you tell us a bit more about how this came to be?

Hon. Dan Vandal: Yes. It's absolutely a great news story. Vaccines have been rolling out very effectively in all three territories. I believe that within the next few weeks there will be an opportunity for everyone in the territories who wants a vaccine to receive one.

I believe that Premier Savikataaq of Nunavut actually announced this morning that there were zero cases of COVID in Nunavut, which is absolutely incredible. If you remember, Brenda, when COVID started about a year ago, almost to the day, actually, and certainly the week, the thought was that if we didn't do a good job of working with the leadership of the north and with the people who live in the north, it could be an absolute tragedy up there in terms of COVID spread.

I really have to tip my hat to the territorial governments, the indigenous nations and the organizations that are in the north in all three territories for taking those tough decisions on isolation and shutting down the borders, for making sure that their internal health care systems were functioning as well as they could and for asking for help from the federal government.

From the beginning, we've been engaged with them. I certainly have, as northern affairs minister, but I know that Dominic LeBlanc, as intergovernmental affairs minister, the finance minister and the Prime Minister have also been engaged with the leadership and the people of the north. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you for that. It certainly is a testament, I think, both to the autonomy of managing one's own affairs and to collaboration.

As a member of the public accounts committee in the last Parliament, I'll never forget the late Michael Ferguson, our Auditor General at that time, telling us that his biggest regret, shall we say, or the message he wanted to leave to all parliamentarians, was how we had up until that point failed indigenous and northern peoples and that we had to do better and could do better. I like to think that he's able to see that this improvement, in a crisis situation, was able to occur.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Yes, absolutely.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: If you could, tell us a bit more about the isolation hubs. How did that come to be such a critical tool?

Hon. Dan Vandal: First of all, I think it's important that back in April—and it actually blows my mind that this was a year ago—our government announced \$130 million to support the northern territories. That included more money for food security, health care supports and support for regional airlines, because that was absolutely key. We know the airlines have been going through a very difficult time in the north. If the airlines are disconnected or if the supply

chain is broken, food does not get up there and medicine does not get up there. It was absolutely essential that we made sure those northern regional airlines got the support they needed.

I commend the transport minister of the time, Marc Garneau, for making sure that all the northern airlines, and provincial northern airlines as well, got the support they needed. The \$75 million took them to the end of the year, with the opportunity to invest another \$125 million over the upcoming year—and I hope we don't need it.

To your question on isolation hubs, the fall economic statement was I believe \$65 million that went to all three territories. It was almost exclusively for isolation hubs and/or health care infrastructure.

We know that infrastructure in the north is not what it is in the south. There's a lot of help, whether traditional infrastructure, housing or health care infrastructure.... It's actually a bigger housing issue that we can have a long conversation about.

Their ask of me and Minister Freeland was for money for isolation hubs, so that if people got infected and had to isolate, they had the room to isolate. In working—

• (1920)

The Chair: We'll have to stop there, Minister. We're over time.

We'll move on to Madame Bérubé for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

My question is for Mr. Vandal.

As you said earlier, in the north, we are talking about the current climate crisis, of course. You also mentioned the harvesters support grant program and the northern abandoned mine remediation program.

You are asking for \$64.7 million for all aid measures in the north. Does that include the measures I just mentioned? I'd also like to know how much of the funding will be allocated to each of the territorial governments.

Hon. Dan Vandal: That's an excellent question.

We have supported the people of the north from the beginning. We work closely with the premiers of Nunavut and the other two territories.

In April, we invested \$130 million to ensure people living in these three territories have affordable access to food so they can stay healthy, to provide some kind of subsidy to northern airlines and to support business people in the communities.

We also made an investment of \$65 million in September, and I think that was exclusively for isolation centres or medical infrastructure. As we know, infrastructure in the north often needs help, whether it's traditional infrastructure, residential housing or medical infrastructure. We've had discussions with the elected officials in the north, and they've identified isolation centres as a priority for them, because they just don't have the space for isolation if they have to deal with a lot of infections. So we have invested \$65 million in isolation centres in the three territories, in partnership with the territorial governments.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thanks, Madam Bérubé.

Rachel Blaney, you have two and a half minutes. Go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

I'd like to come back to Minister Bennett.

In my riding, there is a group of amazing young women who make buttons and earrings. It's their Li' Red Dress campaign. They sell those buttons and earrings. They are beautiful. I encourage everybody to purchase some.

The reason they do it is so they can put up billboards to alert people to the fact that there are missing indigenous women. They put up the billboards. A picture of the woman is on the billboard and they give contact information to try to help the family.

I'm a little frustrated by how long it is taking for the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls strategy to be fully implemented. We know that along so many highways in so many places across this country indigenous women and girls are gone and we never hear from them again. They have been murdered.

I am wondering if you could speak about how long it will take to get the actual work in place. How long are people going to have to fundraise to try to save lives and reconnect families?

• (1925)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you for that question.

Your example of what is happening on the ground is really important. This is the reason there was the first-ever national public inquiry. We need the support of provinces and territories and indigenous governments themselves, such that all of us are working together to have indigenous women and girls and two-spirited and gender-diverse people safe wherever they are. These kinds of local initiatives are really important.

In 2015, we started investing in all of the things that were in the platform and put in place the family liaison units that would help families navigate the justice system and get the information they know. Those have been hugely successful.

As on the Highway of Tears, Rachel, with those billboards, we now know with social media that missing persons, so tragically are still happening. We're going to address this in a comprehensive way that will be accountable. We want to make sure that, as we put in place the concrete actions to stop this tragedy, we continue to measure and adapt the outcomes, but also look at the causes of the caus-

es, and to make sure that we are making progress on all of those things as we go forward.

I hope that those local initiatives end up being supported and get real results.

The Chair: Thanks to everyone. Thanks to our ministers and our staff for joining us.

We are going to conclude this session.

There will be a brief suspension to set up our next minister and guests.

• (1925)

(Pause)

• (1930)

The Chair: I will now call this meeting back to order, and welcome our guests, whom you have all met through the sound check.

With us for the second hour, along with the staffers we have just met, is our Minister of Indigenous Services, Marc Miller.

Minister Miller, would you please go ahead, for up to six minutes, and then we'll get to our questions.

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Indigenous Services): Thank you, Chair.

Kwe kwe. Ullukkut. Tansi. Hello.

[*Translation*]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that I am here, in Ottawa, on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people.

I welcome this opportunity to provide you with an update on our continuing effort to confront the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and to answer your questions on supplementary estimates (C) and the main estimates.

COVID-19 has presented many challenges for all of us, and in particular at-risk or underserved communities. Throughout this time, Indigenous Services Canada has supported first nations, Inuit and Métis to ensure they have the resources they need to keep their communities safe and respond to COVID-19.

I would like to thank the committee for its report, titled "COVID-19 and Indigenous Peoples: From Crisis towards Meaningful Change", which it presented to the House of Commons at the start of the month.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government has invested approximately \$4 billion in COVID-19 funding for indigenous communities and organizations. And more recently, we have worked with key partners to support self-determination and community-led action for the administration of vaccines to indigenous peoples, in culturally safe settings. Strengths-based, culture-informed strategies have worked, reinforcing our commitment to reconciliation.

• (1935)

[English]

This pandemic has heightened entrenched health and social inequities that exist in Canada. It's why our pandemic preparedness response and recovery actions need to prioritize health equity to protect the people of Canada from the threat of COVID-19 and future pandemics.

As we support vaccine administration [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] vaccine rollout for indigenous adults living in cities and towns across Canada, it's a race to get the last person vaccinated, not the first. With vaccine production ramping up at Pfizer and the recent approval of the AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, we can confidently [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] opportunity before fall 2021.

As of March 18, 2021—for the committee—200,560 doses have been administered in first nations and Inuit communities in the provinces and to residents in the territories. Vaccinations are under way in 586 indigenous and territorial communities.

Over the past two months members of the Canadian Rangers have worked in more than 25 communities across the Nishnawbe Aski Nation in northern Ontario, in particular, helping provincial authorities with tasks related to immunization. This is in addition to the 46 first nation communities that the CAF has supported in recent months to manage COVID-19 outbreaks and facilitate vaccine distribution.

As announced last week by the Prime Minister, my department and the Canadian Armed Forces will soon begin supporting an unparalleled accelerated vaccination program in a number of isolated first nation communities, as well as a select number of larger indigenous communities, starting in Manitoba.

We're currently working closely with Public Safety and the Canadian Armed Forces to expand on an accelerated vaccine rollout in first nations communities in the northern part of Manitoba. Over the next few days we'll be working in partnership with indigenous leadership to assess community needs and ensure the appropriate CAF resources are sent to communities requiring assistance. This deployment may include up to 23 different communities, and more details will be shared as we proceed with planning in the coming days.

Now let me turn to the estimates items. With supplementary estimates (C), the total authorities for 2020-21 will be \$17.8 billion. These supplementary estimates reflect a net increase of \$1.5 billion. Of this, \$1.1 billion is related to various COVID-19 response measures previously announced. This includes \$530 million to support surge health infrastructure, primary care nursing surge capacity and urgent public health responses in indigenous communities; \$380

million in additional funding for the indigenous community support fund; \$63.9 million for supportive care in indigenous communities; and \$58 million to indigenous community businesses.

As a clarifying note, several COVID-19 initiatives were previously authorized under the Public Health Events of National Concern Payments Act. Following the repeal of the act, ISC is requesting the unspent amount as voted appropriations through the supplementary estimates (C) to continue these initiatives.

These estimates also include, among other things, additional funding to improve access to safe, clean drinking water in first nations communities and to support the implementation of An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families, as well as to reimburse first nations and emergency management response and recovery activities.

For 2021-22, the department's main estimates are \$13.5 billion. This reflects a net increase of about \$693.9 million, or 5%, compared with last year's main estimates. Our two biggest increases are a net increase of \$508.6 million in 2021-22 to improve access to safe, clean drinking water in first nation communities, and an increase of \$122.6 million in 2021-22 for supportive care in indigenous communities.

Before concluding and proceeding with questions, I would like to address two additional points. First is the current situation in Pikangikum First Nation. These reports of harassment towards members of the community are extremely concerning and require a thorough investigation by the police. Our top priority is ensuring the health and safety of the community members and the staff who support that community.

Due to safety and security concerns, the ISC primary care practitioners were evacuated yesterday evening. The choice to relocate the health care staff, after some time, was not a decision that was taken lightly and was only done after careful consideration and planning to ensure necessary resources are in place to serve community members in the event medical assistance is required. I want to assure everyone that we are working in partnership with the community to find a long-term solution that meets the health and security needs of both community members and health care workers.

Secondly, as this is World Water Day, I would like to take a brief moment to highlight that last week the chief and council in Wet'suwet'en First Nation confirmed that they had lifted their long-term drinking water advisory, which had been in place since 2012.

With this, our government, working in partnership with first nations, has now lifted 102 long-term drinking water advisories since 2015. During the same time, 177 short-term advisories have also been lifted, ensuring clean drinking water to first nations. Projects are also under way in 38 communities to resolve the remaining 58 long-term drinking water advisories.

This commitment to clean drinking water is not just about ending long-term drinking water advisories. It's about building sustainable systems that ensure first nations communities have access to safe drinking water now and in the future. We know that further action is required as drinking water issues remain. We continue to support first nations in meeting this commitment.

With that, I look forward to your questions.

Meegwetch. Qujannamiik. Marci. Thank you.

• (1940)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Miller.

Gary Vidal, please go ahead for six minutes.

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

Before I begin, I just want to take a minute to thank the minister and his team for being here. I know they're busy people and it's a challenge. I also want to congratulate the minister on becoming a grandfather recently, I believe. That's something new in his life, and as a person who has also experienced that recently, I'd say it's the best thing ever.

Isn't that right, Minister? I just want to congratulate you on that.

Minister, just over a year ago, we were actually able to meet in person in the committee room in Ottawa, and as we discussed the estimates—the mains for this year and supplementaries from the year before—you and I had a conversation about the philosophy of your working towards eventually ending the role of Indigenous Services Canada and indigenous communities gradually taking over their services and becoming independent. You and I had an interaction around the number of jobs that were being added and some of those kinds of things.

Beyond the growth of people in the department, there's been some increase in spending. Understandably, with COVID, there was, as you said, \$4 billion. We are also talking about \$2 billion over the last two years, I believe. There are a couple of other things I would just throw into the mix here. Some really significant generational opportunities have been lost, Keystone XL being one of them, for five first nations in Alberta and my province of Saskatchewan. Last week Chevron Canada announced that it had not been able to find investors for its Kitimat LNG project—again, a generational opportunity for 15 first nations that's been lost.

I've heard from many indigenous organizations, as I've engaged with them, about the great difficulties of trying to proceed with projects in the investment environment. I couldn't help but notice that in your letter for the 2020-21 plan you refer to this philosophical desire to kind of end the existence of the department, but we don't see that in the 2021-22 plan. At a meeting I had last week with one indigenous economic development leader, he told me the

only solution to solving all of the socio-economic issues in our communities is jobs, jobs, jobs.

My philosophical question for you is this: Can you explain how the goal of having indigenous self-determination and of eliminating of your department, long term, can ever transpire without economic prosperity in the communities?

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, MP Vidal.

You've touched on an exceedingly large number of interlocking and important points, and I don't see them as philosophical. I see them as everyday practical points, particularly as you see increased funding not only through the pandemic but to address a number of long-standing issues. That goes to my mandate letter and the department's mandate, which is to close socio-economic gaps.

As you see large investments in health, in education and in infrastructure—all elements that are key to closing those socio-economic gaps—we have to look at ourselves as a department and ask whether we are doing this in the right way.

How does that start? It starts with trusting the voices on the ground, a number of the ones you talked to MP Vidal, and doing infrastructure, health and education transformation in the way that moves towards self-determination as encompassed in UNDRIP, as encompassed in a lot of the relationships we entertain with indigenous peoples.

We've seen the real net effects of that through COVID. We know that solutions, when they are implemented on the ground.... Indigenous peoples know how to best protect their people in a once-in-a-lifetime epidemic. It goes to self-government and through self-determination.

All of those elements of economic prosperity tie into your overarching point, MP Vidal. Yes, it's jobs, but it's also fostering economic parity among indigenous peoples and non-indigenous peoples. That's the mandate of the department.

• (1945)

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

Let me drill a little further into that. In the 2021 department plan, under a section called “Enabling Economic Prosperity”, you talk about “supporting capacity-building efforts” by leveraging “greater access to capital”.

I'll share a quick story from my own riding, where a very incredible opportunity for an indigenous-led group of first nations.... There are 12 first nations in northern Saskatchewan who are looking to invest in an incredible opportunity. It's going to be hugely successful. The private industry will be all over this if they don't get into it. However, in the context of reaching out to the exact organizations you refer to in the departmental plan, they have not been able to secure any opportunity to gain equity investment.

I keep coming back to the fact that it's the equity investment. The opportunity they have to create own-source revenue to help themselves is critical, but when they actually have an incredible project where they could do that, that door is being slammed in their faces. That's a bit of a frustration on the ground, as you talked about.

Hon. Marc Miller: I'll briefly respond.

I get it. Whether it's equity investments, whether it's indigenous big business, small business or medium business, we know that access to capital has not been there. We've seen those tailored supports that Indigenous Services Canada and the Government of Canada have had to deploy to allow indigenous businesses and indigenous innovation to thrive. I hope to see that continue.

These are always conversations that need to happen, on many levels and across many levels of government, as indigenous communities are investing. They are a bright light in the future in terms of own-source revenue, which I would note has been extremely hard hit throughout this pandemic. As it diversifies and as it becomes a support in the community, we see those programs that it supports, so you'll find no objection from me.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Can I squeeze in...?

The Chair: We're right at six minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Are you not going to let me squeeze one more in, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: No, I won't. I'm sorry about that. We have some voting to do before the end of the session.

Next is Marcus Powlowski for six minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Mr. Minister, you spoke a fair bit on how our government has tried to help indigenous communities in dealing with the pandemic. I think you'll agree that the devil is often in the details. Let me bring up one of those details, which is Thunder Bay, which unfortunately seems to be the epicentre of COVID in Canada at the moment, with I think the highest rate of COVID anywhere in the country. It certainly has disproportionately affected the indigenous population, both within the municipality and the adjacent Fort William First Nation.

As of a week or so ago, in the ICU, of 18 ventilated patients, 16 were indigenous. As of last week, they were also transferring people out of the Thunder Bay ICU to other ICUs because we were full up.

My understanding is that Indigenous Services has been assisting both the municipality and Fort William First Nation in the management of our local problem. Can you tell me what your department has done to help the people of Thunder Bay?

Hon. Marc Miller: Based on our initial experience with the pandemic as it first broke out, understanding the limits of how my department operated, usually in the "on-reserve" context, and understanding quite quickly that COVID doesn't look at that distinction and has impacted indigenous communities disproportionately, we know the reasons and factors that impact that.

Getting those tailored resources that money can't buy, whether it's deployment of the CAF or deployment of search supports, all those, as quickly as possible into settings where we don't necessarily operate effectively or where there are other jurisdictions, provincial namely, whose primary responsibility it is.... We like to say "whole of government", but what does that mean? That means working with municipalities, provinces and across our departments, which have sometimes been accustomed to working in silos, and deploying them into communities as quickly as possible.

The initial shock point that we saw at the beginning of the pandemic was La Loche, and their response was amazing in the face of overwhelming and quite scary COVID percentages. We've seen that happen in repeated ways. Thunder Bay, in the earlier part of the year and very recently, has been one of the examples. Our department moved quite quickly to work with the local health authority to deploy resources. Through a number of organizations we funded about \$1.9 million in support through the indigenous community support fund to a number of organizations, including indigenous communities that had been advocating from the very beginning of the pandemic to support their off-reserve populations.

The Nokiiwin Tribal Council has been funded to roll out the vaccination clinics for the indigenous populations in Thunder Bay, among others, which we were able to fund for about half a million dollars. However, there are a series of a little over a baker's dozen we supported that are all doing amazing work, have never been funded properly, but we have to do it in the context of this pandemic.

I would also highlight at the same time the amazing work that has been done by the local health authorities in banding together. We're not out of the woods by any stretch of the imagination, but this is one of the areas where we have to cut through these jurisdictional juggernauts at times to see how we can best serve people in record time, because we do move more slowly than COVID. We've seen that time and time again.

● (1950)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Thank you.

On behalf of the people of Thunder Bay, thank you very much for your assistance.

I think this is the third time I've asked you, but if you remember, as the pandemic was starting I asked what we can do to help prevent COVID from spreading to isolated northern indigenous communities. Given the experience with H1N1, we were concerned this was going to be a disaster. I think I brought it up in the fall again, and I wanted to bring it up again to give you an opportunity because I think you've done a really good job in preventing that from happening. I think the vaccine story is looking like a really positive one in those northern communities.

Can you tell us how the isolated fly-in communities in northern Ontario are doing with respect to vaccinations at the moment?

Hon. Marc Miller: Marcus, I would take this opportunity to highlight the amazing work that's been done by the folks at Ornge in getting vaccination rates in the 90% range in a number of communities, despite immense logistical challenges. This is one of the aspects of the mass vaccination efforts in communities. It's not over yet. A lot of communities need to get that second dose, and we'll be there to help them, whether it's the assets of the Government of Canada or leveraging those that exist in the province. Whatever works, we're there to help.

I quoted aggregate numbers at the beginning. I don't like generalizing because the rollout is still a little uneven and there are some unnatural fault lines. However, as a generalization, if you take the 200,000-plus vaccinations that have occurred in indigenous communities or in the territories, we're halfway there in terms of the indigenous population. Now that may vary from a southern to a northern community, which is why I hesitate to generalize, but this is a race against the clock, particularly in the face of a potential third wave that is fuelled by variants of concern.

The suite of tools we deploy includes point-of-care testing. We have about 400 units deployed now, including the GeneXpert ones, which were the early leaders and the reliable ones. However, whether it's the ID NOW or others, that's to help that point-of-care testing, which is complementing not only the vaccine rollout but the secure fly in, fly out communities with our health workers. The last thing they want to do is be a vector of spread. That continues, and we continue to learn, but I think Canadians can be quite proud of this, because we really focused on—

The Chair: We'll have to leave it there. Thanks, Minister.

We will move on to Madame Bérubé for six minutes.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

My question goes to Minister Miller.

In the votes in the supplementary estimates (C), I see no appropriation requests for building and renovating housing. However, we know that, in Indigenous communities, groups of people have to live together because of the lack of housing. That is not ideal, especially in a pandemic. In addition, we know that we are short more than 8,000 housing units for First Nations in Quebec.

What is the federal government doing to improve the supply of housing for Indigenous peoples in Quebec?

• (1955)

Hon. Marc Miller: We have a number of initiatives, Ms. Bérubé.

I could mention the rapid housing initiative recently launched by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. It has subsidized the construction of 55 housing units specifically for seniors in Cree communities in Quebec. That initiative comes under the responsibility of Minister Hussen. Of course, since budget envelopes for housing are generally shared among a number of departments, the responsibilities are also shared among a number of ministers, such as Minister Bennett, Minister Hussen, who is responsible for the CMHC, and myself. My department is therefore not automatically the sole point of contact for matters of housing.

Clearly, there is a shortage of housing in Indigenous communities. More work must be done, whether it is in the Far North or in communities that are closer. In terms of COVID-19, we know that people living in overcrowded housing carry the virus. That will be a factor to consider following this pandemic.

We must invest in housing to ensure that we really eliminate this shortfall in infrastructure and housing. We must consider housing to be important as a medical issue. Experience has shown that overcrowding in Inuit communities in the Far North is definitely a factor in transmitting disease and in outbreaks. That was the case for tuberculosis, just as it is also the case in the current global COVID-19 pandemic.

You raised a very good point. I must point out, however, that a number of departments share the budgetary envelopes for housing.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: You also are aware that the Bloc Québécois is proposing that the federal government use as a model the strategy being used by the Government of Quebec in Bill 66, in order to speed up the construction of the infrastructure and the housing needed to improve the health conditions of Indigenous communities. One aspect, for example, is housing for seniors.

Are you using Quebec's strategy as a model?

Hon. Marc Miller: Ms. Bérubé, I am not the only decision-maker in cabinet, but I am certainly aware of it. You will see that I will pay a great deal of attention to any initiative that supports indigenous communities, whether it comes from the Bloc Québécois or any other party.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: You are also aware that we want to see the federal government reverse its decision to cut 8% of the funding for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's On-reserve Non Profit Housing Program for 2021.

Are you going to maintain the funding or, even better, increase it?

Hon. Marc Miller: We would always like to increase funding, but I will have to examine your proposal in more detail before I can comment on it in the context of this committee.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Is there any hope?

Hon. Marc Miller: There's always hope.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Earlier, you talked about drinking water. The Office of the Auditor General of Canada concluded that the department had no regulatory regime in place for access to safe drinking water in First Nations communities.

Why has the department not developed and implemented a regulatory regime for drinking water in First Nations communities? What steps is the department taking to develop and implement such a regime?

Hon. Marc Miller: With all respect, Ms. Bérubé, I would not want people to think that there is a legal or regulatory void. We have an entire team at Indigenous Services Canada that works with communities to check that quality standards for drinking water are upheld. Without that, we would not be able to know which communities have a long-term advisory or a short-term advisory as to the quality of the drinking water. We are constantly doing tests.

The fact remains that the legislative framework put in place by the Conservative government was very roundly criticized by First Nations peoples, because it provided no resources with which to eliminate long-term advisories on the quality of drinking water. That, of course, was not appropriate, given the context.

But thanks to our work with the Assembly of First Nations and others, we now have a number of initiatives for reforming the regulatory framework. I do not want to leave people with the impression that there is a legal or regulatory void. The standards used to determine whether a water quality advisory should be for the long term or the short term are very strict, and for good reason: safe drinking water for people in Indigenous communities is vitally important.

The Auditor General did indeed express some criticism in this area, but I was somewhat opposed, given the regulatory context that is in force today.

● (2000)

[English]

The Chair: That brings us to time.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Rachel Blaney, you have six minutes please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here with us today to answer these very important questions.

Recently, I was approached by a grade 1 and 2 split class through their principal Jasmin Marshman from Henderson Elementary School in Powell River. They were very concerned about the lack of safe drinking water in first nations communities across Canada. They have seen information about it in the Auditor General's report.

They were so motivated that they wrote multiple letters to the Prime Minister and made sure that I also received a copy of them so that their voices could be heard. I think it's quite telling when a grade 1 and 2 class in Powell River is willing to stand up and talk about this. They want to hear more about what you're going to do about it and what this government is going to do about it, Minister.

I appreciate that there has been some success, but we saw in the Auditor General's report that very clearly there still isn't enough support. The percentage of water systems assessed as medium and high risk stays around 43%, so even with the successes, there are still continual things popping up. This means indigenous people continue to face challenges.

I always think of one of the chiefs in my riding who said that what we continue to see with levels of government is incremental justice. It's a little bit of justice when it's convenient, and I think this is something we really need to look at.

Minister, I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about the plans that your department may have around updating operations and maintenance funding formulas. We know that those were developed 30 years ago and can't possibly reflect the advances in technology and the actual costs of maintenance. That's important, because what we're hearing from indigenous and first nations communities is that their water system operators are being paid 30% less than folks in other places. This is an ongoing concern of not having the resources they need to legitimately start a system while making sure that the regulatory process is clear, consistent and makes sense to everyone.

Minister, I hear your resistance around the legislative framework, but we need something stronger than this. We are obviously not paying people right and are looking at systems through a 30-year-old window frame. I'm wondering if you could speak to that.

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for that.

You'll note that with the lifting of the Wet'suwet'en long-term water advisory, that leaves only one left in B.C. We're cautiously optimistic about that in the next little while. It'll be something to really celebrate and lift up.

Clearly, there are a number of elements in the Auditor General's report that are very compelling. When I was named minister about 15 months ago, I sat down with my team and said that there may be elements that perhaps don't fall strictly speaking into the context of lifting the long-term water advisories and that we need to address through additional funding, through a number of other elements. This was before COVID hit. I asked my team to sit down and come up with what that might look like.

What came back with a lot of the engagement was obviously the O&M, the operations and maintenance, of what is a critical water asset. Communities were telling us that it was important to get to the deadline of lifting all the water advisories—I think that is something that is important for all first nations, whether they're on long-term advisories or not—but a lot of questions came with that. What are you going to do after March 2021? Where are you going to be? Are you going to disappear like you did before?

These all turned around the very important points that you raise, which are around the deficiency in the funding model. For the benefit of everyone, I note that it was an eighty-twenty model. The government would give 80% and the community would be asked to contribute 20%. With a state-of-the-art asset like a plant, particularly some of the new ones that are being built, the people in there need to get equal pay for equal work, as you've said. Those people are the pride of their communities. You can't blame someone if they want to go somewhere else, or if they get pulled into another community, which is often non-indigenous and is paying them more. It just isn't fair.

There were a lot of discussions around the funding model and making sure that there was more of a perpetual funding model that would allow us to fix the O&M gap, because it contributes precisely to that point, as you said, which is the insecurity, the risk model and profile that the Auditor General looked at.

When I saw the medium-to-high risk category, that risk is with respect to the integrity of the asset, because it is threatened through people that aren't paid properly and perhaps through cutting corners to get people to work there. That puts the integrity of a critical asset at risk. There are some issues with the sensitivity of what that is measuring, because it's not as if you're looking at crumbling infrastructure. You're looking at all the investment and maintenance in and around a critical asset system for a community.

Those are aspects that perhaps fall outside of what would be taken to lift the long-term water advisory—i.e., producing safe and clean water—but they are so critical to the lifespan and the asset span of a plant, for example, and they weren't necessarily addressed in prior funding models. The announcement in late November of \$1.5 billion was, yes, designed to address some of the challenges and the costing around dealing with the global pandemic and increased costs, and what we might do to support communities that want to build through a pandemic, but also that O&M that you raise, which is so critical.

It is part of a greater approach to water safety and integrity that was addressed a few months later in the Auditor General's report. It's something that I'm glad we're moving forward on. There's still more work to do, but at least in terms of financial support and telling communities that the Government of Canada is there for them, that funding is there and it just has to be rolled out over the coming months.

• (2005)

The Chair: Thanks, Minister.

Thanks, Rachel.

Now we go to five-minute questions with Arnold Viersen.

Arnold, please go ahead.

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

I as well want to thank the minister for being here. I appreciate his time today.

Back in 2019, only nine boil water advisories were eliminated. At that rate, it would take seven more years to eliminate all the remaining water advisories—hoping that no more were established. There were 13 new advisories in that year, so we actually went backwards, yet the department's plan for 2020-21 claimed that you would be able to eliminate all of them by March.

Why was that target not updated earlier?

Hon. Marc Miller: I'm looking at some of the time frames you're referencing, MP Viersen. Clearly, going into COVID, or just prior to, we were confident we would be able to hit that date of March 2021. There are always challenges with infrastructure and building critical assets in communities, as well as relationships that have to be maintained during COVID.

When COVID hit, we did see a slowdown; there's absolutely no question about it. Your question has to do with updating the numbers. As a minister, in the first three or four months of going into a global pandemic, we wanted to be in a position to assess what the impact of COVID was on ensuring that critical assets were built. What did we need?

More important than assessing the challenge is actually moving to fund and support communities through a historic pandemic, not really knowing how different waves will hit. As well, there is what I addressed to the committee in an answer to MP Blaney on the other issues in and around lifting long-term water advisories that touch on water security in communities.

In order to give Canadians a portrait of what was going on, we wanted to get a sense of what the delays were, what the causes were and how we could move quickly to address them. I think you'll see in the updated website that for each community with a long-term water advisory still in place, there's a work plan and an ETA on a number of these.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I met with a number of new Canadians over the summer. They supported the Liberals in the last election because, as they said, “We moved to Canada. Canada's a great country.” That was one of the reasons they supported the Liberals. Canada's given them a lot but they were concerned about the water advisories.

Would you say to those new Canadians who supported you that the failure to remove those water advisories is because of COVID?

• (2010)

Hon. Marc Miller: If you look at where we were in 2015, MP Viersen, there were 105 long-term water advisories in effect with no plan to remove them. We are now at 102 as of Thursday of last week. That is real, significant progress for thousands of indigenous households.

There is no question there have been challenges that were due to COVID. I could name them. You and I could sit together and I could walk through every community that has challenges. There's no question that those communities and those that have remaining water advisories want additional assurances as to where we will be in the long term. This is why I asked my team in March or April to sit down and get a sense of where we're going and how we'll navigate through a global pandemic to ensure that we're with communities every step of the way, plus address some of those issues that I've talked about in previous answers around addressing a failed funding model or a model that wasn't meeting communities' expectations.

Every person that you've spoken to should know that there's a plan for each long-term water advisory to be lifted and the investment is there to support it. I think that's the confidence that the backing of the Government of Canada would give communities to lift their water advisories.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Where is the pressure point on the lifting of the advisories? Is that placed on you and your ministry, or is that placed on local communities? Where's the pressure point? Where's the piece that we're waiting for?

Hon. Marc Miller: It's important for everyone to realize, to the extent it hasn't been clear up to now, that the Government of Canada doesn't lift the long-term water advisories. The communities do. There are a number of communities that have been in long-term water advisories, like Neskantaga, that everyone saw—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Is the ministry pressuring these communities to lift their water advisories?

Hon. Marc Miller: We always work in partnership to ensure that the water is safe, first and foremost, and then the community takes the decision to lift the long-term water advisories. It's not the position of the Government of Canada to pressure a community to lift their long-term water advisory. Neskantaga has been under a long-term water advisory for a quarter of a century. They may have had good water that has tested clean for three months, but there's a confidence level that still needs to be achieved and we're not there yet.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We go now to Mr. Battiste.

Jaime, you have five minutes.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for your comments.

Last week was a good week for the Mi'kmaq community of Eskasoni. For four days elders, knowledge holders and language speakers were prioritized and received vaccines. As I think of the anxieties and fears of so many people in my community that were expressed to me just one year ago today, and then I am able to say

that we've been able to save those language speakers, those knowledge holders and our elders in our community and to have the vaccines roll out, that was a very meaningful thing for our community.

I just want to thank you, Minister, for that. I want to thank the chief and council of Eskasoni for the measures they took, as well as the health workers. So for that, *wela'lin*.

I want to stay on health. I know it's been a year in which we've had a lot of struggles, but one of the things that have dominated headlines is systemic racism within institutions such as health. We all remember the tragedy of Joyce Echaquan and what she had to endure. Indigenous people can be apprehensive and reluctant to seek health care due to the fear of facing discrimination. You have been outspoken and a champion for the need for change.

Can you please elaborate on the work our government is doing to tackle systemic racism in health care?

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, MP Battiste. Your advocacy is really exemplary. I can imagine the amount of pride you must feel to see your community getting priority access. I think it says something about our country that your elders and elders in communities across Canada who are the most vulnerable are getting vaccinated before the Prime Minister or me or anyone who has the privilege to sit in cabinet. That says something about our country. People may say that's a thin veneer. I don't think it is. I think it says something about how we need to conduct ourselves going forward. It's a good lesson to us all.

We know the impact of systemic racism, particularly in institutions where people are at their most vulnerable, whether that's in the health care system or in their interactions with the police. It kills and it has killed, and it will continue to do so until we fix it.

The solutions aren't easy. They don't happen overnight. If they did, I think that would sort of diminish the scope and depth of the problem. There are things we are doing immediately in Indigenous Services Canada, such as making sure that Joyce Echaquan's community is front and centre of the continuing conversation over Joyce's principle, which achieves, broadly speaking, substantive equality between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. It's a principle we support, but we're going to need the provinces and territories to be part of this conversation. We all know about the jurisdictional spats we've had with respect to health care, and in this case those have been on the backs of indigenous peoples.

There is work that needs to be done within my department in terms of how we transform health, how we provide more mental health supports—which is a key issue coming out of the pandemic—and how we move towards distinctions-based health legislation, which will be a difficult conversation with indigenous communities who haven't felt consulted up until now. We will have to recognize that their way of conceiving their own health needs to be respected and can't be dictated to them from Ottawa.

We recognize that a number of the elements and reports that have been published to date don't need much further examination. We need to start investing in infrastructure and supporting local infrastructure and local self-governance over health infrastructure. That is key.

You perhaps have stories in your community about how that is missing compared to the situation in a similarly situated community. That's work that the federal government can do, but as you've heard through the elements of my answer, it isn't easy. It's complex, and in the case of the legislation, it will take time, because we won't succeed if we don't engage with indigenous communities. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] distinctions-based health care legislation that reflects the continuing gap and the treatment of indigenous peoples as second-class citizens by the health care system in this country, regardless of the jurisdiction.

I hope I have been able to paint a bit of a picture in the couple of minutes I had.

• (2015)

The Chair: You took it right to time. Thank you very much, Minister.

Next we have Madam Bérubé and Ms. Blaney for two and a half minutes each.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Bérubé, the floor is yours.

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

I am going to go back to the issue of drinking water.

Mr. Minister, because of major salary shortfalls, it is difficult to keep water system operators in those positions, especially those in First Nations.

Is the department considering an increase in funding for the development and maintenance of water systems in order to make sure that the operators of those systems are compensated according to the standards that the sector itself has established?

Hon. Marc Miller: The short answer is yes. Let me remind you that, in recent months, we announced investments in work on, and community support measures for, water infrastructure. In 2025, that investment will be four times greater than it is today; that gives you an idea of how important it is. This is an exceptional investment that will transform the way in which we plan for the sustainability of these infrastructures.

What the Auditor General pointed out in her report was the fragility of the infrastructure. Last December, we very quickly set about correcting that situation.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Let's talk about Joyce's Principle. I would like to know what the government has done to improve the situation for those women.

Hon. Marc Miller: As I said in reply to a question from Mr. Battiste, it is not an overnight solution. From the outset, we made sure that the community of Manawan was front and centre in the discussions. Sometimes, there is an annoying habit of appropriating a concept and forgetting where it came from. That is not the case here. In fact, we want to make sure that Joyce's family and the

people of Manawan continue to be at the centre of the discussion. The principle is not yet completely accepted, and we must be able to call for it to be implemented in all provinces. Although it's a very simple concept, it cannot be achieved overnight.

Since that tragedy, I have been ensuring that our department is making a contribution. Specifically, we have offered the community psychological support and financial resources, as required. We have also made it possible for people in the community to go to other hospitals until the situation at the Joliette hospital is resolved.

• (2020)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, both.

Ms. Blaney, we'll conclude with your two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, I also have some serious concerns around indigenous housing and the fact that we still don't have a comprehensive indigenous housing strategy for Canada. We know that the member for Nunavut did a housing tour in her riding. It was absolutely horrifying to see the reality—people living in substandard housing, mould, overcrowding—and the many, many challenges that those communities are facing. The NDP is calling for an urban, rural and northern indigenous housing strategy that is governed and led by indigenous peoples and housing providers. This is different and unique from the distinction-based indigenous housing strategy that this government likes to talk about.

How long will these communities have to wait to see housing that is actually reasonable, where we don't see the overcrowding that's across Canada, and that is really led by those communities? That includes rural and urban communities on reserve and off reserve, and of course the northern communities. How long will they have to wait?

When will there be a comprehensive strategy that starts to actually deal with this profound challenge that these communities are facing? It's absolutely horrific.

I'm wondering if you could talk about that.

Hon. Marc Miller: As I mentioned in a previous response, this pandemic has taught us to look at housing through a health lens, and as Minister Bennett says, it's very hard to mend what you can't measure. Part of my mandate is to complete an infrastructure plan in partnership with Minister Hussen and Minister McKenna to get a sense of where those investments need to be. It doesn't mean that we can't act quickly through short-term housing.

You saw the billion dollars that was announced by Minister Hussen for rapid housing. That will make a difference, but it's very much a small piece of the puzzle, which is really closing that infrastructure gap by 2030. People may seem to think that's a long period of time, but in infrastructure talk, that's actually a pretty short period of time.

There are investments that need to be measured, quantified and have the finances and support of the Government of Canada to do so. This government—and it's difficult to contradict it—has made historical investments in housing, but obviously, they have not been enough and they need to continue. That gap is there. What we've seen through COVID is that it is very much a health concern that has made it such that communities are three and a half to five times more vulnerable to COVID because of, in particular, the crowded living conditions that they live in.

People might say to us that we should have known it because that is the lived reality of many of the Inuit, and I wouldn't dispute MP Qaqqaq on that point.

The Chair: Minister, thank you.

Thanks to the staff and the minister for attending today.

Members of the committee, that was a very interesting and forthright set of questions. There was wonderful discussion today on our topic.

Having thanked the minister and staff, who I now dismiss, it is my duty to proceed to the vote on the supplementary estimates (C) and the main estimates, in that order.

Should the committee wish to proceed as it did previously with estimates, I will ask now if I have unanimous consent to call the votes as a group and adopt them on division.

• (2025)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: On division, yes.

The Chair: Thanks.

DEPARTMENT OF CROWN-INDIGENOUS RELATIONS AND NORTHERN AFFAIRS

Vote 1c—Operating expenditures.....\$4,211,991

Vote 10c—Grants and contributions.....\$116,662,361

(Votes 1c and 10c agreed to on division)

DEPARTMENT OF INDIGENOUS SERVICES

Vote 1c—Operating expenditures.....\$76,637,529

Vote 5c—Capital expenditures.....\$16,646,763

Vote 10c—Grants and contributions.....\$1,471,445,078

(Votes 1c, 5c and 10c agreed to on division)

CANADIAN HIGH ARCTIC RESEARCH STATION

Vote 1c—Program expenditures.....\$1

(Vote 1c agreed to on division)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Once again, we don't have to go through all of those, so having adopted the supplementary estimates (C) on division, shall I report the supplementary estimates (C) 2020-21 to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move on to the main estimates.

Once again, if we can proceed as we just did, do I have unanimous consent to call the votes as a group and adopt them on division?

CANADIAN HIGH ARCTIC RESEARCH STATION

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$29,761,017

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

DEPARTMENT OF CROWN-INDIGENOUS RELATIONS AND NORTHERN AFFAIRS

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,634,265,848

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$268,287

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$3,032,868,793

Vote L15—Loans to Indigenous claimants.....\$25,903,000

(Votes 1, 5, 10 and L15 agreed to on division)

DEPARTMENT OF INDIGENOUS SERVICES

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$2,095,935,733

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$6,115,242

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$11,283,347,845

(Votes 1, 5 and 10 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Having adopted the main estimates 2021-22 on division, shall I report the main estimates 2021-22 to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you, everyone.

We are also adjourned. We'll see you tomorrow. Thank you.

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