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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, May 14, 2009

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, May 14, 2009

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES (A), 2009-10

A message from Her Excellency the Governor General transmitting supplementary estimates (A) for the financial year ending March 31, 2010, was presented by the President of the Treasury Board and read by the Speaker to the House.

* * *

• (1005)

[*Translation*]

CANADA LABOUR CODE

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-386, An Act to amend the Canada Labour Code (replacement workers).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to introduce my private member's bill to ban the use of replacement workers and maintain essential services in the public service.

I have heard the criticisms levelled by the other parties, including the Liberal Party, regarding the various anti-scab bills introduced in this House. It is important to understand that, for Quebec, and in fact for the rest of Canada, this would improve the Canada Labour Code.

Thousands of employees who work in banks, at ports and airports, and for telephone and telecommunications companies come under the Canada Labour Code and do not have the benefit of anti-scab legislation. As I have explained, the bill aims to ban replacement workers while maintaining essential services in the public service.

Quebec's experience has clearly shown that provisions banning the use of replacement workers by far the best solution for all parties involved in a labour dispute. Not only does the use of replacement workers encourage violence, but it often leaves deep scars that poison the work environment after disputes are resolved. In Quebec, under the current law, the number of person-days lost as a result of labour disputes has gone down considerably and is well below the Canadian average.

I therefore ask my colleagues to vote in favour of this bill when the time comes.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

[*English*]

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Mr. Speaker, I would ask you to seek unanimous consent of the House to return to tabling of documents so I could table a report.

The Speaker: Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

CANADIAN FORCES PROVOST MARSHAL

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32(2), I have the pleasure to table, in both official languages, copies of the 2007 annual report of the Canadian Forces Provost Marshal.

* * *

FEDERAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ACT

Mr. Stephen Woodworth (Kitchener Centre, CPC) moved that Bill S-216, An Act to amend the Federal Sustainable Development Act and the Auditor General Act (involvement of Parliament), be read the first time.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I do wish to present this bill to the House. It proposes to amend the Federal Sustainable Development Act and the Auditor General Act to ensure the full participation of each House of Parliament.

(Motion agreed to and bill read the first time)

* * *

PETITIONS

ANIMAL WELFARE

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the privilege of presenting two petitions today. The first is on animal welfare.

I am pleased to present this petition on behalf of hundreds of Canadians who have signed this petition and who are in support of the universal declaration of animal welfare. Their position, obviously, is that we should treat animals in a humane fashion, and that we see from time to time that that is not always the case. They would like to see Canada follow that declaration.

Government Orders

●(1010)

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I have two petitions I would like to table. The first is on employment insurance.

RIGHTS OF THE UNBORN

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from 200 individuals asking the government to recognize its obligations under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and to particularly focus on the right to life. Since 1969 there has been no law to limit abortion in Canada. They are asking the government to enact legislation to protect the life of the unborn.

PROTECTION OF HUMAN LIFE

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present a petition totalling 100 signatures from concerned citizens calling on Parliament to pass legislation for the protection of human life from the time of conception until natural death.

ANIMAL WELFARE

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my second petition is signed by hundreds of individuals who are talking about animal welfare again, but it is about transportation and the time we take to transport animals.

It is basically talking about conforming with the EU scientific community on animal health and welfare, which is really about how long animals should be in transport before they reach their final destination. Sometimes animals are unfortunately subjected to long travel times before they actually reach their destination. As we know, their destination is quite often an abattoir.

I think what the folks are saying is that at the very least their transportation should be in a humane fashion, not in a long fashion where they actually suffer. I present this petition on their behalf.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the House for consent to revert back to tabling of committee reports. We had a spelling mistake this morning. Our clerk has made the change in the report, and now we are ready to table the report.

The Speaker: Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fifth report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development entitled “Canada and the Crisis in Sri Lanka”.

Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to the report.

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

TRANSPORTATION OF DANGEROUS GOODS ACT, 1992

Hon. Josée Verner (for the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities) moved the second reading of, and concurrence in, an amendment made by the Senate to Bill C-9, An Act to amend the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Act, 1992

The Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

(Motion agreed to, amendment read the second time and concurred in)

* * *

●(1015)

[Translation]

MARINE LIABILITY ACT

The House resumed from May 13 consideration of the motion that Bill C-7, An Act to amend the Marine Liability Act and the Federal Courts Act and to make consequential amendments to other Acts, be read the third time and passed.

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to speak today on Bill C-7, An Act to amend the Marine Liability Act and the Federal Courts Act and to make consequential amendments to other Acts

This bill affects a number of regions of Canada. I should start by saying that, naturally, the Bloc Québécois is in favour of this bill in principle. This bill follows on the signature by the Government of Canada of the International Convention on Civil Liability for Bunker Oil Pollution Damage, 2001, as well as the protocol of 2003 to the International Convention on the Establishment of an International Fund for Compensation for Oil Pollution Damage, 1992,

It was high time that the government honoured its international commitments. Not only does integration of these new instruments and principles into federal law guarantee higher compensation to victims of marine accidents, but it will also have positive repercussions on the Canadian compensation fund.

Government Orders

Withdrawing the prohibition for adventure tourism activities to use waivers in order to be exonerated of civil responsibilities toward their passengers is a good thing for us as well. By their very nature, these activities involve a degree of risk that participants must assume. Although this change may at first glance seem to be sufficient, it will be necessary to evaluate its repercussions in committee. The creation of a maritime lien for Canadian ship suppliers against foreign vessels was equally desirable, but again it is essential that it be studied in committee because that will make it possible to determine the scope of this addition and to suggest improvements to it as well.

I will close by stating that the Bloc Québécois is in favour of this bill.

[English]

Mr. Andrew Kania (Brampton West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Newton—North Delta.

I have the honour to speak today to Bill C-7, An Act to amend the Marine Liability Act. I will restrict my comments to the maritime lien that is proposed in clause 139.

I am not a member of the transport committee but I have attended four different meetings. I was a substitute at the first meeting and I noted a serious problem in the legislation, so I came back for three other meetings to see if we could fix it. I proposed amendments specifically with respect to this maritime lien and those amendments were discussed on May 7. I am disappointed to say that the government voted against them so I am here today to explain the situation and ask the Conservatives to reconsider them. However, at a minimum, Canadians need to know that they voted against these proposed amendments and why they did.

Specifically, clause 139, the maritime lien, which is what we call a right, states:

A person, carrying on business in Canada, has a maritime lien against a foreign vessel for claims that arise

(a) in respect of goods, materials or services wherever supplied to a foreign vessel for its operation or maintenance, including, without restricting the generality of the foregoing, stevedoring and lighterage; and

(b) out of a contract relating to the repair or equipping of a foreign vessel.

It is a lot of language but, in short, it means that if a foreign vessel comes into Canada and a person supplies services to it, the person has a right to get paid and attempt to exercise that right against the actual ship.

The next question is whether this right actually does anything for the person. The problem is that it does not because, in most circumstances, that right would be meaningless. Although the person would have the right to get payment, how would the person actually do it because, generally speaking, people will have extreme difficulty trying to get the money?

We need to look at this on a very practical basis. If people are owed \$200, \$500, \$2,000 or whatever it may be, how will they get their money? Although this proposed maritime lien would give people the right to try to get the money, what do they need to do? With the way the current system is written, which has a gap in terms of the remedy, people must sue. Therefore, if there is a foreign vessel in a port that owes people money and it is about to leave, there is

nothing people can do about it. If it is from a foreign country, people will need to hire a lawyer and try to sue somewhere even if a judge will accept jurisdiction in a foreign country. This is not a practical right because there is no way to exercise this.

Even if the ship were to remain in Canada, people would need to hire a lawyer, which means money. Whatever the bill may be, whether it is \$400, \$500, \$800 or more, people need to hire a lawyer in order to sue, pay a filing fee and then try to get an order to stop the ship or sell the ship in order to get their money. People would then need to prepare motion material, which means a notice of motion, an affidavit or two and a documentation order, that is assuming they could even find a lawyer who can get it into court. Even if they do find a lawyer who can get into court, they then have to wait. It could be a number of hours and the lawyers charge by the hour. Assuming they could even find a lawyer and even find a judge, they may end up spending a few thousand dollars trying to enforce a debt of a few hundred dollars that is owed. People will not do it.

Once again, I am not on this committee but I kept coming back because I thought this would be better for Canadians. Sections 128 and 129 already have a provision for a designated officer to direct a ship to stop and to issue a detention order if it looks like something untoward has occurred. What that would really mean is that some problems would be solved. First, a ship escaping or leaving Canada would be stopped. Once it is here it would not be able to go anywhere, which means we are preserving that right and that lien.

● (1020)

Second, if a detention order were issued, part of it would say that the foreign vessel must pay a certain amount of money before it could be released. It just keeps the status quo. It keeps it there. The owner can pay the money and go or go in front of a judge, which puts the onus on the foreign vessel owner to actually do something. At least Canadians would be protected.

With the amendments that I proposed, which I am disappointed to say that the Conservatives voted against, ships would be kept in Canada and they would either have to pay or go before a judge. That would skip the first layer of having to actually hire a lawyer and spend all that money.

Government Orders

The Canadian Bar Association had a representative who said that he was opposed to these amendments. I understand that because I am the former secretary of the Ontario Bar Association representing approximately 17,000 lawyers. The job of the Ontario Bar Association and the Canadian Bar Association is to represent lawyers. I am particularly disappointed with the parliamentary secretary, the member for Fort McMurray—Athabasca, who is also a lawyer. He said that he knows how a court works, and I believe him, but he was supporting lawyers. In essence, he said, “You can hire a lawyer, you can pay a lawyer and you can get into court and we’ll leave things the way they are”. That means that people who cannot afford a lawyer or people who have very small claims will not have any fair redress. I am very disappointed with that because our job is not to represent a particular constituency group, but Canadians in general. Although I am lawyer, I am here to represent the people of Brampton West and Canadians. I am very disappointed with the government for this.

I would like to read some specific quotes by the parliamentary secretary when he was at the committee on Thursday, May 7. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure gave examples and said, “You’ve got a large, expensive ship...with a small bill, whatever it may be, owed to Canadians, and I just don’t see that as being appropriate”.

In essence, he was siding with the foreign vessels and with the lawyers over Canadian citizens who may be owed money but, for some unfair reason, the foreign vessel has refused to pay them. I do not see that as appropriate for a member of Parliament.

A second quote by the parliamentary secretary reads, “I believe lawyers can be called on a phone—I know I was available most nights until midnight—and can do a lien and find a judge in time to do it, even after hours”.

What he is saying is that we will not be changing the system, we will not be making it better for Canadians and constituents. We will keep it with lawyers. We will keep this as an expensive system even though the amounts in question are so small that either people will not bother and, therefore, will be treated unfairly, or they will not be able to afford to exercise their right. I find that quite disappointing.

The legal counsel for the Department of Transport acknowledges that this change would be something that would be added to the legislation. He says that it would be an element to the way in which a maritime lien is enforced and a positive step to help Canadians and our fellow constituents.

Despite that comment, the parliamentary secretary and the government, for whatever reason, just voted against all of this to defeat what I think would be a very positive change for Canadians.

Although this may seem complicated, it is not. It is as simple as this. There is a new right, a maritime lien under clause 139. There would be no way to practically use this unless there is a substantive change. It just would not happen on an everyday practical basis.

I proposed a substantive amendment that would create a remedy so Canadians could enforce and use this maritime lien. It would help Canadians, who we should be focusing on, and innocent service providers, not advocacy groups, such as the owners of foreign vessels or lawyers. There is nothing wrong with lawyers making a

decent living but we can cut out the first step for the benefit of Canadians and still require a court as a second step. This would save money and protect the rights of Canadians.

• (1025)

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Brampton West for his insightful contributions to a sometimes very technical debate that has everything to do with serving Canadians and ensuring the commerce of this land operates on an even keel, no pun intended, and with total transparency so that all consumers and contributors are protected.

As he said, his suggestions were turned down by the government even though virtually all of the representatives who came forward said that the rights of Canadians could be protected if we could have a minor amendment linking the vessel owners in a contractual arrangement with those who were utilizing the vessel for purposes of commerce. They do not necessarily need to be the same individual. However, as long as there could be a contractual connection, then we might not need those amendments.

I am wondering whether the member for Brampton West would clarify that for us, because the government accepted neither of those positions. In negating either of those positions, is it his opinion that the rights of Canadians are that much diminished? Could the House stand for diminishing the rights of Canadians?

• (1030)

Mr. Andrew Kania: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for supporting my amendment and recognizing immediately that additional work was required to make this legislation better.

I am always concerned when somebody puts something down on paper that sounds good and looks good but does not actually do something, which is what the government has done with respect to this maritime lien in clause 139. The average person will not be able to use it or will choose not to use it because the amounts of money that we are talking about, generally speaking, that Canadians will seek to go after are quite small in relation to what they will need to pay a lawyer. On a practical basis, they may not even have the opportunity because these vessels may leave Canada. Some may come back and some may not come back.

I believe that to make this maritime lien an actual right that will work, we need to do more. Why put it in there if it is not going to work? I would encourage the government and members of the committee to reconsider this for the benefit of their constituents.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for noticing this and taking the time and effort to go back three times. He clearly feels very strongly about this. I also thank him for his attention to the bill and for his very thoughtful discussion.

I am wondering if the member could share why he thinks his amendment was voted against, especially when the vote was in favour of a foreign vessel over Canadians.

Mr. Andrew Kania: Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, I think that it was voted against simply because of politics. From what I saw in the committee, there was an agreement that they would simply vote against all Liberal amendments. I do not think they actually considered it.

Government Orders

When I was able to sit down with some of the members of the committee afterward, I believe many of them were actually supportive, in theory, of this extra protection but I think politics trumped what was right on behalf of Canadians. That is why I am here and that is why I am asking the Conservatives to consider this and to do what is right on behalf of Canadians, rather than simply focusing on what their political objectives might be in trying to defeat Liberals no matter what.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak in favour of Bill C-7, which represents some badly needed updates to the Marine Liability Act. These updates are essential in an age when Canada's waterways are becoming some of the most hotly contested in the world.

Whether it concerns land, sea or air, the world has undergone a revolution over the past 20 years with regard to making polluters pay. Responsibility never seems to be properly demonstrated to organizations or individuals until the perpetrators are hit in their pocketbooks.

Bill C-7 would bring Canada into line with several international conventions that have come into effect in recent years.

In British Columbia the threat of accidents occurring as a result of oil tanker traffic is always of great concern.

In terms of oil spills, the *Exxon Valdez* disaster will remain in our minds forever. It spilled 41 million litres of oil, one-sixth of the oil it carried, and polluted 2,000 kilometres of coastline. Hundreds of thousands of birds, fish and animals died right away, including somewhere between 250,000 and 500,000 seabirds, thousands of sea otters, hundreds of harbour seals and bald eagles, a couple of dozen killer whales, and a dozen or more river otters.

Over the past two years there has been furious discussion in my home province about the validity of the federal government's statement dating back to the early 1970s in regard to a moratorium on oil tanker traffic along the B.C. coast. While I am not going to delve into that particular debate in my speech today, I am going to try to point out that we as a country must be better prepared to mitigate any future incidents should they occur. With this in mind, I am pleased that the first convention this bill would ratify is the Protocol of 2003 to the International Convention on the Establishment of an International Fund for Compensation for Oil Pollution Damage, 1992.

More specifically, this change to the act would provide an additional tier of compensation for damages resulting from the spill of persistent oil, mainly crude oil, from tankers from about \$405 million to \$1.5 billion per incident. In citing this provision, let me attempt to properly convey the sensitive nature of British Columbia's fragile and pristine coastal areas.

According to Statistics Canada, the total cargo handled at Canadian ports and marinas in 2006 was 466.3 million tonnes. The domestic tonnage handled in 2006 represented 136.2 tonnes. What must also be noted is that these figures do not include vessels that are used for recreation, tourism, or purposes other than cargo transport.

This leads me into the next provision of the bill that is extremely important for British Columbia, namely, the exemption of liability for the marine adventure tourism industry.

Before I talk about this industry and its growth potential, I want to point out one simple fact. All marine adventure tourism operators are required to have a minimum of \$1 million in liability insurance, and a certificate of insurance must be delivered prior to a license being issued. This requirement alone is reason enough for operators to be exempted from part 4 of the act. Combine this with the fact that waivers are a standard practice for water-based adventure tourism activities that are inherently fraught with danger, and there are enough guarantees in place to ensure safety associated with that industry.

• (1035)

Operators cannot always be at risk of frivolous claims, particularly with activities where one of the main attractions is the risk involved. The fact is that the west coast of British Columbia provides an unparalleled setting for ecotourism, adventure travel, nature tourism or sustainable tourism. These are currently the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry on the west coast. They present risks, but they also create jobs in British Columbia. By current projections, the estimates for anticipated labour demand in the area of adventure tourism and recreation will be 13,100 workers by 2015. This is nothing to scoff at.

This bill is an indication that Ottawa understands the unique nature and characteristics of operators within marine adventure tourism. This is a substantive bill. Although I have only had time to touch upon a couple of main issues, I would like to make a couple of salient points to conclude.

Bill C-7 represents the culmination of many years of important work that parliamentarians on all sides of the House have engaged in. It is very specific in its amendments to the Marine Liability Act and therefore is very limited in the kind of attention it might garner. However, these are the kinds of amendments that can make industries more globally competitive and more important, protect Canadians from dangers that often only become apparent when it is too late.

This is an important bill. It has been a privilege to stand today to articulate my support for it.

• (1040)

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my colleague to elaborate further on some of the benefits this legislation might have for the port of Vancouver and in the other ports in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

The port authorities on the Lower Mainland are very anxious to ensure that the commercial legislation and the regulatory system benefit the enterprises that they think are crucial to the development of the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. In fact, representatives appeared before members of the committee, myself included, and talked about the economic advantage the port of Vancouver has for British Columbia and for all of Canada.

Government Orders

In the course of the last couple of governments, beginning with the one that I was privileged to be a part of, the Liberal government under Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien established a Pacific gateway to develop the Canadian economy through the Lower Mainland port authorities.

I am wondering whether the member would take a few moments to explain how this legislation enhances the economic benefits and opportunities for those ports and for the transportation system in western Canada that emanates from those ports.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Eglinton—Lawrence for all of his work on this bill with regard to the amendments, even though they did not go through due to opposition from the Conservative government. The amendments had to do with adventure travel, to make sure that adventure tourists are safe. He wanted to ensure safety but the government assured him that those provisions already existed.

When it comes to economic opportunities, Canada's economic future lies in Asia. Canada is the closest port. With regard to tourism vessels that leave from the port of Vancouver, this bill will ensure that Canadian suppliers will be able to put a lien on foreign vessels if they do not pay the money owed to Canadian consumers. In fact, it encourages more economic opportunity when it comes to this bill covering general liability, as well as liability associated with suppliers.

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my colleague is a fellow British Columbian. He knows that in our area on the west coast we have some of the most beautiful marine environments in the entire world. Biodiversity in the marine environment is extraordinary off the west coast of British Columbia, particularly next to my riding of Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca.

One of the challenges is ocean-going vessels that dump oil into the ocean. This causes enormous trouble within the ocean. The buildup of oil products is poisoning our oceans, destroying seabirds and affecting marine life.

Does my colleague not think the government needs to work with our partners all over the world to put an enforcement mechanism in the treaties and agreements that we have signed, from the UN law of the sea to many of the other agreements? Do we not need an enforcement mechanism to back up the treaties we have signed?

● (1045)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Mr. Speaker, the bill covers two things, the oil spills from the tankers and also the bunker oil spills from all ships.

The bill is a good start to bring Canada up to an international standard. This has been long overdue. It is a good step. When we form the government, the hon. member could have—

The Deputy Speaker: Resuming debate, the hon. member for Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca.

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a real pleasure to speak on this issue. My friend and colleague who just spoke very clearly mentioned some of the challenges we have, and as British Columbians, these challenges are in our neighbourhoods. They are next to our homes and affect the livelihood of the people who live and work in our communities.

Our nation, though, is very blessed. We have 5.87 million square kilometres of marine areas, one of the largest marine areas in the entire world. This is our legacy. This is what we have been given, and we are the stewards and responsible for managing this not only for our country but indeed for the world.

As we know, ecosystems are connected. They go beyond borders. The complex ecosystems and environmental systems in our country are connected to a global ecosystem. We have, as the saying goes, only one world, so it is up to us to be able to do the right things for them.

The challenges affecting our oceans are significant: global warming, pollution and the biocumulation of toxins. In fact, in British Columbia, whales such as orcas, and indeed, on the east coast, if a beluga whale were to wash up in the St. Lawrence River, that beluga whale would be considered to be toxic material, because the biocumulation of toxic materials in high-level marine mammals is a deep concern.

We also think, with respect to why the orca population on the west coast may have flatlined and is declining, it is because the accumulation of these biotoxins is actually having a negative impact on the ability of these large and beautiful mammals to reproduce.

We have the issue of oil spills, as I mentioned before, and ships, people, fractured storm drainage systems, which is happening in Victoria now, and logging practices. In my area, we have seen logging that has gone right down to the level of the rivers. What that is doing, in violating existing laws, is actually destroying the ability of these rivers to produce the salmon that so many British Columbians live on. As a result of that, the lack of enforcement is allowing the destruction of the very salmon beds that are integral to our ability to have a fisheries industry that is sustainable and growing.

On the issue of overfishing, 90% of the commercial fish species in the world are either at their limit or being overfished, which means they are in decline—for example, tuna and marlin. We saw what happened with the northern cod on the east coast of Canada. The fish species that the world consumes right now are being fished at such a level and at such a rate, in such an irresponsible way, that they cannot survive.

What will the impact be on our ability to eat fish? It is going to severely compromise it, not only for Canadians, but around the world in developing countries where the consumption of fish is one of the most inexpensive and most accessible, historically, sources of protein. Without the protein, people's lives are going to be affected from a health perspective.

Government Orders

Different fishing practices that exist now, I would say personally, should be banned. Why do we allow dragging? Why do we allow fishermen to drag the bottom of areas, which destroys the ability of fish to reproduce? The act of dragging is actually reducing and damaging the very places these fish reproduce. The goal we must have, in my view, is to create a network of marine protected areas.

In British Columbia, we have some marine protected areas, but the level of marine protected areas we have now is inadequate. These must be based on ecosystem management systems and sustainable fisheries practices. If we are able to do this, we will indeed be able to have the marine protected areas that are required.

As the basis of this, the marine protected areas must be founded on the sound principle of the combination—

Mr. Speaker, on a point order, is this a conversation that is going to go on during my speech?

• (1050)

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I always thought it was inappropriate for people to talk while others are speaking, but because I was having a conversation with the Speaker I thought that would supersede virtually everything else. If that was not the case, then it is a new rule of Parliament and I am happy to abide by the new rules as they develop.

The Deputy Speaker: I do not think that is a new rule. It has always been the case that members are supposed to stay attentive while other members are speaking.

If the member for Eglinton—Lawrence wishes to have a conversation with the Speaker, perhaps he could come up to the chair so the member for Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca is not disturbed.

Hon. Keith Martin: Mr. Speaker, thank you for doing that. I appreciate that.

Alanna Mitchell, who we hosted as part of the international conservation caucus a few weeks ago, is a former *Globe and Mail* reporter. She has published a book called *Sea Sick*.

In this book, she eloquently and articulately speaks about the damage taking place within our oceans, not only the oceans in other parts of the world but also the oceans that abut our country.

I recommend that people take a look at this book, because in it she describes the impact of the different pressures I mentioned before. One thing I would like to reiterate, and she says it very clearly, is that if the sea life disappears, the life on land will disappear, too.

This point is a fundamental principle that we must adhere to and that we must remember, because if we do not do something to deal with the destruction of sea life right now, then what we are going to see is that it will negatively affect life on land, and there is no going back.

How this is happening through global warming is as follows.

As the temperature is rising, as we are increasing carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, what we are seeing is a meltdown. In the Arctic, where my colleague from the Yukon lives and has spoken very eloquently about this, the melting of the polar ice cap is actually also causing a melting of the permafrost.

The permafrost contains methane. Methane is a greenhouse gas that is 25 times more powerful than carbon dioxide. With this release of this methane, the methane is going up into the atmosphere and exacerbating global warming.

That is acidifying the oceans. The pH is going down. This is negatively affecting the life in the oceans, particularly the small creatures that form the basis of the food chain.

What we are seeing when that happens is a downstream domino effect on the rest of the food chain, affecting larger and larger species. So the commercial fish species that we consume and the fish that others consume are in decline.

One example I want to bring up, and I hope that the Minister of the Environment at some time would like to pay attention to this, is that there are very small fish up in the Arctic that are absolutely essential for the ecosystems in the Arctic.

These small fish are about to be harvested in an unregulated fashion by Norway. Norway is going to go up into our Arctic regions and harvest these fish, which are the basis of the food chain in the Arctic.

I would implore the Minister of the Environment to go and deal with Norway and develop a regime to make sure that we are not going to have an unregulated fishery in the Arctic that is going to have a cataclysmic effect on the Canadians who live in the Arctic. This is a very serious problem.

The other issue I want to bring up that the government could pursue is the state of the marine protected areas we have on the west coast and the need for other marine protected areas.

Right now with the collapsing fish stocks that we are seeing and the dead zones that are occurring, it is more important than ever for us to have these marine protected areas that are forming a contiguous area. As to some of the principles in applying for this, I know the IUCN and CPAWS have done a good job of identifying specific areas that need to be protected.

I would ask the minister to really listen to the WWF, CPAWS and the IUCN, and to take a look at those areas that they have identified as being critically important. They are important because they are crucial areas for different species of marine life in the sea. The removal and the absence of those areas is going to have a cataclysmic effect on the fish species there.

Right now, we have 59 conservation areas, covering some 3,020 square kilometres, that have been established throughout the region. This is a small fraction. In fact, only 1% of the areas that exist on the west coast are actually protected. There are other areas that have to be protected, and they have been identified.

I would just ask again that the government really listen to the NGO organizations that have identified these areas. If we do not do this now, those areas are going to be destroyed and the expansion of dead zones are going to continue in the ocean, which is going to negatively affect the communities that live in the coastal regions and are dependent on those areas.

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• (1055)

One particularly unique species that we have on the west coast is glass sponges. They have survived 9,000 years, but right now, more than half of these glass sponges have been destroyed. They are, in effect, living dinosaurs. These areas should be protected because they are critically important in many ways for the larger submarine habitats that exist in the cold waters off the coast of British Columbia. If we fail to do this, these sponges will never come back.

The whale species, which are a signature species on the west coast, are in decline. This is a global problem. British Columbians are very attached to the orca killer whales. As I said, we have seen the numbers flatline and decline in some of the subspecies of orcas on the west coast of British Columbia. As a result we can see that these species can actually disappear.

Of course, the other issue is seabirds. Seabirds are a sentinel species. On the west coast of Canada, we have had a decline of these species, in part because of dumping into the ocean.

I want to get into the issue of dumping pollution into our oceans. In Victoria, we have a very particular issue having to do with sewage treatment. There is a demand on the part of the federal government to force Victoria to have a secondary plus level of sewage treatment. Unfortunately, this proposal, which is now estimated to cost \$2 billion, is going to be the largest boondoggle in Canadian history. I will explain why it is not necessary and what should be done to address the environmental concerns that Victorians have.

I spoken with members of the Ministry of the Environment and they think we are simply dumping raw sewage into the ocean or into Victoria Harbour. That is absolutely not the truth. The fact of the matter is, though it is going into toilets and sinks, it is actually sieved so that nothing larger than four millimetres actually gets out the other end. In fact, the area around the outfalls in Victoria is not damaged. The area immediately around it has some effects, but more than 100 to 200 metres outside, there is no effect. In fact, those areas have some of the best fishing around, and fisherman will agree with that.

What comes out of the outfalls in Victoria is 99.9% water. Many of the bad things, such as the heavy metals, lead, mercury and pharmaceuticals that are of concern, are controlled by source control. They are not really dumped down. Even if they are dumped down, a secondary plus treatment system will not deal with this problem.

The major source of marine pollution taking place right now in Victoria is coming from the fractured storm drainage system. The detritus that Victorians see on the side of the ocean at times, particularly after a storm, is not a result of the outfall. The root cause of that is a fractured storm drainage system that is more than 80 years old, in many cases. That stuff is leaking into the environment. That is bad. It needs to be fixed, but it is not part of the mandate of what the federal government has asked Victoria to do.

In other words, the federal government is chasing a \$2 billion boondoggle that is not going to affect the environmental needs of my community. This will be an irresponsible use of the taxpayers' money. If the minister wants to affect positively the environmental needs of my community of Victoria, wants to improve the marine life and decrease pollution in our oceans, he needs to do the following.

First, do not pursue this \$2 billion sewage treatment boondoggle proposal. Second, put the funds into the repair of the storm drainage system. Third, have a better source control system. We already have a good one, but it can be improved somewhat. If we do that, the marine environments around Victoria will be addressed.

He can also pursue the enforcement rules that are necessary to ensure that dumping of garbage into the oceans is not going to continue. Much of the garbage that we see floating around does not come from an outfall. It actually comes from ships dumping raw garbage into the oceans. It comes from people dumping garbage into the oceans right where they live. That is the cause of the problem.

• (1100)

I would try to save the taxpayer \$2 million, but the government is marching down a road it will regret. The proposal I am giving can be found on www.rstv.ca. It is backed by more than 10 environmental ocean scientists at the University of Victoria and more than six chief public health medical officers in Victoria. We are all on the same side, a side that is different from the government.

The government should look at the United States, where certain communities actually received an exemption. They have the same type of unique ecosystem as we do with the deep ocean currents and the cold water. They were able to take the essentially organic matter coming out of the outfall and use it for what it should be, which is food for marine life in our oceans.

On another matter, the issue of fishing, I would ask the Minister of the Environment to work with his counterpart, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans. There is a deep rot within the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. There is an inability of the department to deal with the pressing environmental challenges we have and an inability to allow a sustainable fishery on the west coast.

There is a lack of inclusion of stakeholders and a lack of dealing with the fundamental issues of enabling us to have funding for the salmon hatcheries. If we did not have those salmon hatcheries, essentially we would not have a commercial fishery.

We ought to have a system where the government works with the provinces to enforce the laws we have to stop forestry practices from destroying fish beds that are essential for the reproduction of fish.

There is a need for enforcement officers in the area and also an investment in science to do the monitoring that is required. Without this, we cannot have an effective commercial fishery.

There is an urgent issue regarding fish farming in the oceans. Open fish farms are placed right in the area where the smolts leave the rivers and go into the ocean. These smolts go by the open fish farms and pick up sea lice, which affects their ability to survive in the open ocean. A simple solution is to move those fish hatcheries out of those areas. The second thing that can be done is to only allow closed fish hatchery systems so the organic matter and other products that grow the fish quickly will not get into the larger ecosystem.

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The absence of this is a serious problem to British Columbians, and ultimately it will affect our ability to have access to the fish we consume. The failure to do this on the east coast has cost hundreds of thousands of jobs with the collapse of the northern cod fishery. We do not want that to happen in British Columbia. Already there has been a significant contraction of those involved in the fishing industry, and part of it is because of the decline in fish stocks and the excessive pressure that has occurred.

We debated the seal hunt in the House, but we did not deal with the Europeans. European and Asian commercial fishing fleets are raping the world's oceans. They are destroying the world's oceans by creating dead zones. An international effort must be made, and Canada must take the lead on it, to put pressure on the European Union to halt the irresponsible, destructive commercial fishing practices that are destroying the earth's oceans.

The minister needs to study the work by Dr. Sylvia Earle, formerly of Woods Hole, Massachusetts and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California. She has eloquently, clearly and scientifically spoken about and detailed the destruction of our oceans.

The oceans are our birthright. They are our responsibility to give to future generations. We can have a sustainable fishery. We can have an ocean system that will be there forever, but it is up to us to implement the solutions required to ensure that happens.

• (1105)

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to compliment my colleague for balancing the preservationist approach to the environment and the commercial interest that develops economies so that we can all enjoy that environment.

My colleague has demonstrated some very particular concern with respect to British Columbia and Canada's north because these are the areas that appear to be most vulnerable. If truth must be told, all of Canada's water systems are vulnerable.

This particular bill attempts to deal with those who would flagrantly abuse the waterways by not having vessels that are appropriately equipped and prepared to withstand the challenges of nature as they transport goods, like petroleum, through our waterways and along our coastlines.

As a result of the government following a Liberal lead in terms of making the bill effective, this legislation attempts to put a series of fines and legislative mechanisms in place to ensure that such flagrant abuse of our waterways is dealt with in an expeditious and meaningful fashion. One of these, of course, is to put fines in place, and the other one is to make it absolutely illegal to conduct business in a fashion that would be injurious to the environment and to Canadians at large.

In his thematic approach to this issue, I know the member has considered these options. I wonder whether he would take us from the thematic approach he has employed to the specific one and give us an indication of whether he thinks the fines implemented in the bill are sufficient to discourage people and businesses from engaging in the practices that would lead to some of the disasters he has pointed to.

Hon. Keith Martin: Mr. Speaker, the member has asked an interesting question.

Penalties can be on the books, but the challenge is enforcement. I am still wondering where the enforcement aspect is in this legislation. Historically the government has not invested in the enforcement capabilities we need today to enforce the laws we already have. I am looking for the enforcement aspect of the bill, which is absolutely essential.

The member brought up the issue of the navigable waters act. The government added the navigable waters act to Bill C-10, the budget bill, an issue that had nothing to do with the budget at all. By putting this in the budget bill, the government actually compromised what it claims it wants to do, which is to have a system in place to protect our waters and to do proper environmental assessments of our waters.

As the member mentioned, waterways across our country are under threat. The changes the government has put in place to the navigable waters act are actually going to work counter to this legislation. I would like to see the government remove that completely from Bill C-10.

With respect to the last issue, oil dumping from ships is a huge problem. But the dumping that goes on with bilge cleaning and such is much greater than the large oil spills, and it has to be dealt with.

• (1110)

Mr. Brian Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question was going to be similar to that.

I want to bring an east coast perspective to this. The *Irving Whale* was raised in 1996, after its 1970 disaster. There were 4,200 tonnes of oil and PCB contaminants contained in the hull, and three-quarters of that was recovered. In 1996, the costs were \$42 million. That disaster was not to the same extent as the *Exxon Valdez* spill. Therefore, is the \$150 million limit appropriate?

With respect to enforcement, the act designates officers who would be responsible for enforcement, but there does not appear to be any succinct indication about where those officers would come from or what resources would be provided to finance their work. While I laud the member for his support of the bill, could he elaborate on what needs to be done with respect to enforcement of the bill? A bill that is well meaning and well intended and supported does not necessarily have efficacy if it cannot be enforced.

Hon. Keith Martin: Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely right. We can have all the laws in the world, but unless there is an enforcement mechanism they are not useful. They are not even as useful as the piece of paper in my right hand.

That not only goes for the domestic laws but also the international laws. We have UNCLOS, the UN law of the sea, to which we are a signatory. We have not been able to establish, domestically or internationally, an effective enforcement mechanism. We have a judicial mechanism without an enforcement mechanism, which makes the judicial system not useful at all. This is a fundamental challenge of the signatories to international treaties. We get half the equation correct, but we do not do the other half.

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In my community on Vancouver Island, we only have one fisheries officer to do all the work on the southern half of Vancouver Island. That is absolutely impossible. We see a lot of poaching and destruction of habitat, and we have a beleaguered fisheries officer who simply does not have enough time.

The government really needs to come to the table to define how it is going to provide the resources to enforce the very laws in this bill.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Mr. Speaker, I can see that the Liberal Party is the only one interested in talking about environmental issues. Whether they emanate from a commercial-oriented bill or an industrial-dominated bill, we still discuss issues relevant to the environment. Addressing the environment and environmental issues is the 21st century approach to dealing with economic development. Try as we might to infuse all debate with an economic strategy that has the environment as its centrepiece, the basis upon which everything else is built, it appears we are speaking only to ourselves in this House. I mean that figuratively, Mr. Speaker, because you have been very attentive as we have been going through this bill.

When we brought the bill before the House, Liberal members tried to address what my colleague from Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca just indicated. We want to ensure that if there are penalties, if there is a regulatory system, if there are resources to ensure that the semblance of a strategy be in place, that the appropriate resources be put in place and that the enforcement mechanisms are geared to their implementation. We have been trying to do that in the House, and we find that no one is discussing the environmental impacts, other than us.

However, so that no one gets the impression we are unaware of the economic impacts of careful environmental stewardship, I will ask the member for Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca to examine for us the connection between a bill that proposes fines and a regulatory system and the impacts on the environment, not just in the Lower Mainland and the British Columbia coast, but in all of Canada.

• (1115)

Hon. Keith Martin: Mr. Speaker, we have learned over the years from the World Wildlife Fund and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, with respect to land examples, with some exceptions for necessary protection of lands because they are unique and very fragile, if we look at an area and say we are simply going to conserve something, in the end that area will not be conserved, it will in fact be destroyed.

We have to have, as the member correctly alluded to, the yin and the yang of this, which is sustainable development and conservation. Historically, some have thought that it cannot happen, but we have found that it must happen. We have to balance the ability of putting conservation first. With a mind for conservation, we can have sustainable development. We just have to be aware that what we are doing is not going to create and adopt practices that will damage the very biodiversity that is essential for the life of our species. We human beings are part of the web of life. We are all part of one wheel of life. If we damage one part of that wheel, then we are all affected as a result.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a number of items I would like to comment on peripheral to the bill. It gives us a chance to address issues that our constituents have and

some are exactly in the legislative wording of the bill. I will concentrate most of the time on issues related to my riding in Yukon and to my role as critic for northern affairs, so issues covering the whole of the Arctic.

I want to emphasize on a more global scale the point the member for Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca made on the book *Sea Sick*. If we were to add the prevention of pollution in the bill, it would just accelerate the problem that is in that book, a very critical problem in the world, one that is affected by increased carbon dioxide in the seas thereby damaging sea life. This bill goes to prevent, in a number of ways, issues related to oil spills.

Basically, the book makes the point that global warming is bad. However, in addition, the oxygen that we all breathe comes from phytoplankton in the seas and a small degree in pH change could eliminate that. Essentially, the oxygen on earth and the carbon dioxide would dissolve into the oceans.

As the member for Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca said, there is even much more potent global warming from methane. It is not only coming out of the permafrost as it melts but in huge chunks of frozen methane on the sea bottoms in most parts of the world, including off his riding on the west coast of B.C., off the coast of Japan and of course, in the Arctic. This is a huge concern and Parliament had to bring this to the attention of Canadians this impending crisis, caused by carbon dioxide dissolving in the oceans, to life on earth.

I also want to reiterate the point he made about bilge cleaning and oil spills, that we do not need a wreck of a ship to cause tremendous damage, particularly in the very sensitive eco-environment in the Arctic. It is more sensitive, harder to replenish than the oceans in the rest of the world because of the cold temperatures, et cetera. As ships go up there they either dump waste, which I will talk about later, or they clean bilges or they get other species into the waters. There can be a devastating introduction of new species and extinction of the existing species that have been so essential to life in those areas for thousands of years.

The bill is good in regard to increasing protection for the seas of the world, the lifeblood of many societies, especially in the Arctic, but we have to continue to work in this area on all these other considerations we are going to talk about. I will be talking about proposed future amendments related to that type of protection.

I want to talk about a technicality in the bill and I would like to compliment the Department of Transport. When the bill first came up in a previous government, there was a serious problem in that it applied the rules related to large ocean-going cruise ships, to small canoes, rafting, outdoor adventure and recreation type businesses. Of course, those businesses, for whatever reason, did not get their message across in the first iteration of the bill, but they certainly did afterward because this could put many of them out of business. The rules just did not fit. They did not make any sense. It could make it prohibitively expensive.

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●(1120)

There is an inherent risk that people accept in adventure tourism. There is a need to staff people with qualifications. For some companies that only do one or two trips a year, some of the provisions did not make any sense. Insurance provisions could have made it totally uneconomic to even have an operation.

I certainly compliment the Department of Transport for dealing with the wilderness tourism industry and the Tourism Industry Association of Canada and coming up with amendments to this bill that would not totally wipe out the adventure tourism industry that primarily involves canoes, kayaks and rafts. That is a tremendous improvement to this bill.

I want to talk for a minute about oil spills. This bill contains a great provision in that it amends the Marine Liability Act to implement the International Convention on the Establishment of an International Fund for Compensation for Oil Pollution Damage. Liberal members from B.C. talked about how dramatic oil spill damage can be. Of course, this added liability is very important and it is a good section of the bill.

I want to talk for a minute about what is not addressed yet in Canada over and above this and that is oil spills in the Arctic. In the Arctic there is at present no technology to deal with oil spills. The Beaufort project studies in the 1970s were funded by the federal government and industry also contributed. They did a lot of research in this area. There are some extensive volumes of information on this. However, the bottom line is they did not come up with a solution. Within a few days of an oil spill occurring under ice, the damage is irreparable. There is no way of collecting it. There certainly needs to be research in this area.

The government is very enthusiastic about the fact that perhaps a third of the world's remaining natural gas reserves and a quarter of oil reserves, something of that magnitude, are in the northern oceans. Yet, a government agency could not issue a permit right now. I know that the government thinks that should be developed, but it could not even issue a permit right now because it has no answer to the environmental damage that would occur due to an oil spill.

Statistics make it very clear, I think American statistics, that with the number of projects and developments that take place in the seas, such an oil spill is very likely or at least has a significant probability of occurring. Obviously, we need that protection. As I said earlier, any type of chemical or species damage in the very sensitive Arctic environments could cause long-lasting irreparable damage to the oceans, the life in the oceans and, of course, to the indigenous people who have used the ocean life for thousands of years.

We need to get on with it very quickly. There should be encouragement from all parties to do the research and invest more in research, likely in collaboration with oil companies, on mechanisms for cleaning up the inevitable hydrocarbon spills in the oceans of the Arctic.

The record so far on increasing specific research projects in the north is not good. In the last budget, for instance, the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences has been cancelled. The three main granting councils in Canada have lost money and researchers, and I believe a letter from 2,000 scientists in

the country decried that. The Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences funds things like Eureka, the closest post to the North Pole.

●(1125)

If we are interested in sovereignty, obviously we want scientists in the north. Why would we be cutting and closing our most northern establishment in Canada? It is a backward step related to sovereignty, but more importantly it is a backward step related to Arctic science. It is great that we are increasing facilities in the north, but it is not great if they are going to be empty facilities without any scientists there. I want to really enforce that particular point.

I also want to pick up on an excellent point made by the member for Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe on enforcement. There have been a number of bills to increase enforcement provisions. This is just another one in the order. We must increase our enforcement ability. That is generally accepted and I am sure this bill will pass in Parliament. However, the problem identified over and over again is that the will of the government to provide the enforcement and the resources to actually enforce these things is lacking. A good example is on the inspections related to listeriosis. The government set up a system where there would be fewer inspections on the floor, moving the inspectors off the floor of the meat plants.

Another example was a proposed bill that I think has been hoisted because it was kind of inconceivable, but it was a bill to reduce inspections of grain. This would not only jeopardize human life but would jeopardize Canada's reputation around the world by reducing the inward inspections of Canadian grain.

A third example was in Bill C-3. We just recently extended Canada's ability to enforce the Arctic waters. I think it was unanimously passed. That was great. We extended Pierre Trudeau's bill from 100 miles to 200 miles because of the Law of the Sea change. So it was an administrative change.

Therefore, we increased the area where Canada could apply enforcement by a huge amount, the size of Saskatchewan, yet there was not one penny more allowed for enforcement to cover that area. I think our critic, the member for Eglinton—Lawrence, made that point very eloquently in debate. It is like saying the Toronto police force added another city the size of Toronto to be enforced, but no police officers are added. What is the use of having a law with no enforcement capabilities?

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When questioned on that, it was suggested that we have one propeller plane for the Pacific Ocean, one propeller plane for the Arctic Ocean, and one propeller plane for the Atlantic Ocean. I know one of the northern scientist experts, a professor, was kind of laughing at that. I really do not think that is sufficient monitoring enforcement.

Another answer was that we have increased the environmental inspectors, but remember that we are extending the area of enforcement from 100 miles to 200 miles, so we start at 100 miles out to sea and go out 200 miles out to sea in the Arctic. We asked where the inspectors were being placed and the answer was Yellowknife. If we look at a map of Canada, we can see how many hundreds and hundreds of miles Yellowknife is from the ocean, and then we would have to go 100 miles out before the bill even came into effect.

We have a bill here that increases enforcement. I would just encourage the government to make sure that we are all in favour of the items in here and that it supports the spirit of bill in making sure that it can be enforced.

I want to talk about some amendments that I propose for the future. The reason I have not brought them forward yet is that these are amendments related to this type of bill and a number of other bills.

The problem is that there are a number of items related to shipping, shipping pollution, dumping, oil spills, and the structure of boats that are capable of going through the Arctic spread through a whole bunch of acts. It is very hard to figure out the appropriate place for the amendments that I am going to talk about.

I am putting them on the table now, just to forewarn people. I am hoping that the experts in the federal bureaucracy may have an interdepartmental committee to sit down and decide whether these things that are scattered through a number of bills, probably more than half a dozen bills, should actually be in one bill, how the deficiencies should be dealt with, or whether they should be in more than one bill. Therefore, I am putting on the record some ideas for amendments. These could be looked at in the future if the experts in the various departments and the stakeholders think they are necessary.

• (1130)

Organizations like the Canadian Bar Association, the National Maritime Law Section, the Canadian Maritime Law Association, Wilderness Tourism Association of the Yukon, International Ship-Owners Alliance of Canada, Canadian Shipowners Association, Tourism Industry Association of Canada had input in the bill. If they think these types of amendments are important and are needed, they can provide feedback to me and government officials. Environmental associations can also do the same thing.

As an example of one problem, under the Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act, ships can dump grey water into the Arctic Ocean. I have spoken twice on the sensitivity of that ocean to detrimental substances. In fact, a couple of summers ago the government specifically mentioned that the navy, on individual occasions, would apply for permits to dump grey water.

These are the types of things at which we need to look. Are they necessary or can they be avoided in order to help protect that environment, especially with today's increasingly effective technology to protect the environment by building containments within ships.

The first amendment is for ships travelling Canadian Arctic waters. They would have to adhere to a zero tolerance policy with regard to the dumping of waste in these waters. Personally I think that is feasible. I have had no feedback saying it is not because of the modern technology available to us. It may cost cruise lines and military vessels, but it should be investigated.

The second amendment is the dumping of waste in Arctic waters would be subject to a first offence penalty. This amendment relates to the fact that there were some limited enforcement mechanisms in some bills. Dumping of waste in Arctic waters would be subject to a first offence financial penalty regime, depending on the nature of the waste dumped, extent of the quality of the waste dumped and the estimated damage on the pristine Arctic water ecosystem, plus cleanup costs.

The third amendment is repeat offences would result in more severe financial penalties, including the clean up of environmental damage cost and/or incarceration.

The fourth amendment is it would be incumbent upon shippers entering Canadian waters to provide proof of insurance liability to offset pollution mishap, cleanups or dumping violations. We heard earlier about the tremendous cost of the *Exxon Valdez* spill, which was far more than what was specifically provided for. The member for Newton—North Delta made that point, but what if that had been under ice? It would have been substantially worse.

The next amendment is ocean going tankers would need to carry a minimum \$1 billion per load liability policy. Smaller barges and vessels carrying cargo that could result in toxic or oil spills would need to carry a minimum of \$250 million liability policy.

The next amendment is other freighter vessels and container ships would need to carry a minimum of \$500 million per load liability.

The second last amendment is cruise lines would need to carry a \$350 million liability policy.

The last amendment is all vessels travelling in Canadian waters would be subject to Canadian Coast Guard, Canadian armed forces and Canadian Environmental Service boarding and inspection for potential environmental spills, dumping or violation of shipping standards in Arctic waters.

I put that out for the government officials and stakeholders to provide feedback and to start discussion on improving our protection of the pristine and very vulnerable Arctic ecosystems.

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•(1135)

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Yukon for raising some very important issues in the context of this legislation. There are several, but I will pick up on one of the latter issues, and that is all of that which is resident under the permafrost is under the ice.

My colleague from Yukon has mentioned on several occasions, with respect to this bill and Bill C-3, that it is important to protect the environment and the interests of the aboriginal communities there. I note people in the audience are following this debate attentively. They picked up on that issue as well.

My colleague from Yukon knows very well that one of the issues we attempted to raise with Bill C-7 was that vessels would potentially go through the Northwest Passage. He made reference to the fact that potentially a great number of scientists and geophysicists would look at the latent, vast deposits of petroleum resident in that part of Canada.

For example, the 2008 U.S. geological survey found that 13% of all the untapped, undiscovered petroleum deposits were resident in Canada's Nordic lands under the ice sheets. Further, it found that 30% of the natural gas deposits worldwide were resident off the shore of Yukon and northwest of Nunavut. Indeed, 20% of all liquefied natural gas products were resident in that same place. When we have an environmental accident, where vessels that are not prepared to assume their responsibility travel through these waters, the potential for environmental disaster is huge.

My colleague from Yukon mentioned a moment ago that all such vessels travelling in this area ought to carry a liability of some \$2 billion. The bill does not go that far. Could the member elaborate on the relationship between the liability that must be carried by these commercial operators and the environmental requirements of not only the north but all of Canada?

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Mr. Speaker, I thank our critic for shepherding the bill through this Parliament and through the last Parliament.

We need to have a degree of liability that is economically affordable, but the economic costs of environmental damage to society and the environment are massive and huge. Sometimes they are not taken into account in simple economic evaluations. He mentioned the Northwest Passage, he talked about the economics. There would be a huge savings for ships that would go through the passage. Therefore, they could afford this extra liability insurance.

Additionally, cruise ships are very important to my riding. On one hand, I would not want to put them out of business. On the other hand, it has to be in the cost of the package, and technology would allow it, that the environment is protected. The Canadian government can help by having many more navigational aids and ensuring those cruise ships are safe. This would reduce the possibility of an accident, such as the one that occurred in Antarctica.

•(1140)

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Mr. Speaker, I do not want to deprive my colleague from Yukon of the opportunity to elaborate on some of the principles he presented for the consideration of the House, so I take it

upon myself, and I hope members do not think I am too self-indulgent in this, to re-raise some of those issues in order to afford him the opportunity to elaborate on issues of great importance to Canadians and, in particular, to those aboriginal Canadians who inhabit and maintain our interests in the north.

My colleague talked about cruise ships as well, which is an emerging business along our northern shores. Cruise ship operators constantly worry about the costs that they would have to bear if they offloaded their effluents beyond the 12 mile limit, or close to about 20 kilometres, especially in the way it is determined in their calculation.

My colleague is an expert in these areas. Could he elaborate of just how precise and how important that connection between environmental safety and commercial development is to Canadians everywhere?

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Mr. Speaker, my colleague makes a good point. The cruise ship industry will be happy if I put on the record the fact that the industry thinks the regulations and fees put on them by Alaska have almost closed down the industry. All the tourists we get off cruise ships in Yukon come from Alaska. That has a huge effect on our tourism industry. We cannot over-regulate to the extent that we put them out of business, which in turn results in tourists not coming to our area.

However, that does not mean we cannot protect the environment. We could provide research for these companies with respect to grey water on their ships as an example. With respect to making cuts in research, research officers in the northern research council are going to be eliminated, and this is absurd.

If we are putting this onus on cruise ships, we could improve the services we provide for them. The north is a very dangerous area, and it is not only the ice that presents a danger. Under the Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act of 1970, cruise ships need to be of a certain structure to go in the north. Ice packs move around unpredictably. Part of the Northwest Passage is very dangerous because there are shallow areas and submerged rocks. These need to be charted and the ships need to have navigational aids.

We need to provide better search and rescue services. Companies that go there want to know their passengers will be safe and help will be there for them in an emergency.

These are types of things the Canadian government could invest in to offset the cost to cruise ships and commercial boats. This will result in a win-win situation for everybody.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Yukon feels himself connected to the British Columbia coast and to all of the activities that come from there. He has gone into the commercial ventures. Here today are members from the port authorities of the Lower Mainland, Vancouver, et cetera. He raised an economic development issue that also involves transport that radiates out of that Lower Mainland hub.

Because he spends a lot of time there, could he give us an indication of the nexus between the activity of the port of Vancouver and all the transportation issues that relate as well to Yukon and the north? He actually lives that radiation.

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• (1145)

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Mr. Speaker, the short answer is that we definitely depend on cruise ship passengers coming from the west coast, primarily Vancouver. That is important for us.

West coast port issues are very important for all of western Canada.

I want to go on record as stating that this is a great time to start this debate. There are some important issues relating to stability in those ports, to the rule of law, to labour setups. We need to ensure we have the best available ports for the world on our west coast so other ports do not get that business.

The Deputy Speaker: Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

The Deputy Speaker: The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the motion carried.
(Motion agreed to, bill read the third time and passed)

* * *

FAMILY HOMES ON RESERVES AND MATRIMONIAL INTERESTS OR RIGHTS ACT

The House resumed from May 11 consideration of the motion that Bill C-8, An Act respecting family homes situated on First Nation reserves and matrimonial interests or rights in or to structures and lands situated on those reserves, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak to Bill C-8 concerning matrimonial real property on first nation reserves. This is the second time the government has brought the bill forward. Its previous iteration died on the order paper in 2008 when the Prime Minister broke his own policy and called an early election. It certainly undermines the government's position on this and other bills when it claims the importance of its legislative agenda only to pull the plug on Parliament.

This is not to suggest that the issue of matrimonial law and family law in particular on first nations communities is not important, far from it. There is a significant gap in the law and it is important that the gap be filled. It is fair to say that there is broad agreement by the department, by all parties in the House, by first nations governments, by women's equality groups and by members of the family law and first nations bar that something must be done. We can all agree that work has to take place to put a legal framework in place to protect the interests of women, of families and of children when there is a breakdown in a domestic relationship involving matrimonial real property on first nations reserve land.

Where our party differs from the government is on the approach to this complicated question. This is unfortunate. We saw only last week in the case of the Cree-Naskapi act amendments what difference a cooperative and inclusive approach can make. In that case the Cree nation whose interests were directly involved were able to work with government on a bill that received immediate

support. It was a matter of intensive negotiation involving those most affected every step of the way.

I realize that reforming matrimonial property law in all first nations reserves is a question that is different and it is unique. It is unique in the sheer number of first nations involved that make the need for consultation and cooperation that much more important.

The minister claims that first nations groups were involved in a comprehensive consultation on this bill, but that is not what I am hearing on the ground. The minister may think he consulted, but the people he should have consulted tell me otherwise. It is incumbent upon government to be inclusive and transparent in its dealings with aboriginal peoples. It has to act in a way which is consistent with the honour of the Crown. The process leading up to Bill C-8 fails this test.

Since Bill C-8 was introduced for a second time at first reading, I have had meetings and other communications with numerous stakeholders. These include first nations women's organizations, first nations governments, regional and national assemblies of first nations, and individuals. The sheer number of representations made to me on this bill far exceeds the number I have dealt with on any other piece of legislation. Not only is the number of contacts striking, so is the virtual unanimity of what they are telling me.

Anyone who has been involved in aboriginal policy for as long as I have can say that we do not often hear many first nations leaders singing the same tune. The diversity of opinions can be stark. The differences of opinion can be animated. But on the question of Bill C-8, I have heard absolutely no one from first nations communities in any capacity speak in favour of the substance or the approach of the bill.

The Native Women's Association of Canada is opposed. Like others, including myself, while we recognize the need for a change to the legal framework, there has to be a recognition of broader issues associated with family law in first nations. There are issues of access to justice, violence prevention and the balancing of individual rights and the collective rights of first nations peoples which are left unaddressed. In fact, NWAC has argued that Bill C-8, far from protecting the rights of women, diminishes them.

The Assembly of First Nations has passed policy resolutions supporting a reconciliation of first nations, provincial and federal jurisdictions over matrimonial real property; a reconciliation, not an imposition.

• (1150)

The AFN also supports a broader approach, including both legislative and non-legislative approaches to family law issues. The AFN Women's Council has also rejected the government's matrimonial real property approach, both in this bill and in its former incarnation.

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The government defends this bill by invoking the language of rights. I cannot say that I accept that argument, not from a government which continues to drag its heels on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In fact, it is an embarrassment to Canada on the international stage that the Conservative government has so actively opposed that important international document.

Article 3 of the declaration states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Article 5 states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions...

Article 20 states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and develop their political, economic and social systems or institutions...

Not only is the approach in Bill C-8 inconsistent with international consensus on the rights of indigenous peoples, it is inconsistent with what Canada heard during the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. The royal commission recommended that:

Aboriginal nations or organizations consult with federal, provincial and territorial governments on areas of family law with a view to

(a) making possible legislative amendments to resolve anomalies in the application of family law to Aboriginal people and to fill current gaps...

I would ask people to note the language that aboriginal nations consult with government, not that government imposes top-heavy legislation of its own. It is troubling that despite being rejected by the very people whom it purports to protect, the government forged ahead with the bill anyway.

Not only that, Bill C-8 also flies in the face of what the government's own ministerial representative recommended. Many of Wendy Grant-John's recommendations were ignored, including those concerning certificates of possession and the registration of spousal interests, the enforceability of first nations dispute resolutions and a statutory review of the legislation after three years.

Legislation on its own, without looking at the broader picture and without taking a holistic approach, may well do more harm than good. Imposing federal legislation is not a positive approach in the new era of relations with aboriginal peoples that should have been opened up with last year's historic residential schools apology. Things have to be done differently.

There may well be a place for federal legislation but only in a way that respects and encourages appropriate and holistic first nations law and non-legislative approaches to family law issues, domestic violence and matrimonial law.

Another issue which has to be addressed as part of a broader solution is that of on-reserve housing. The questions of matrimonial real property, domestic violence and access to recourse on the breakdown of a domestic partnership are intimately tied to the availability of housing on first nations land. That is true both for short-term housing solutions such as family shelters or safe houses and long-term housing, making an adequate number of homes of adequate quality for the needs of first nations populations.

The minister says that Bill C-8 would allow for first nations solutions. However, first nations have not been given the time or resources that would allow them to develop and implement their own family law and other support structures consistent with the diversity of first nations cultures.

The government's approach is one size fits all. It has not worked in the past and it will not work in the present or in the future. Canada learned that lesson the hard way through the residential schools experience.

●(1155)

There are legitimate questions about the verification process and the ratification rules set down which first nations would have to abide by in order to have their own law recognized.

To first nations people, this harkens back to the days of the Indian agent, when they had an overseer, someone who would say what was right or what was wrong, what was appropriate or inappropriate in first nations communities. It flies in the face of the inherent right to self-government and the nation to nation relationship. It is a colonialist approach, an assimilationist approach, a paternalistic approach, and believe me, I use those words deliberately.

I ask, what about the first nations cultures, traditions and legal customs which are based on matrilineal descent? Many first nations have their own matrilineal or other customary law concerning marriage and families passed down through the generations. There are cultures with matrilineal descent, others which place special emphasis on extended families or family relationships which go beyond the western emphasis on the nuclear family. These aspects of first nations culture, in many cases, form customary law.

Similarly in Canada, outside Quebec which has its own unique civil code, we have customary laws too. They are no less laws because they stem from custom. They stem from an old English custom with an old English name. That customary law is called the common law. These first nations laws can be used to fill the legal gap, which Bill C-8 attempts to do so clumsily. First nations need the time and resources to do so, time and resources which the government, in Bill C-8, fails to give.

All parties need the time for full and transparent consultation. First nations need the time to develop and plan their own solutions, solutions which respect and promote their own cultural values, customary law and particular social and economic circumstances.

Government can and should be a partner in that process with the first nations. Government can and should provide the necessary support, including assisting first nations and first nations women and families to address access to law, law enforcement and enforcement of orders.

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Government must act more concertedly to address the broader social and economic issues that are intimately tied up with family law on first nations reserves, including violence prevention, health care, addictions and housing. None of these social ills is unique to first nations. Unfortunately, that is far from being the case.

Government must give first nations communities and their governments just that additional window of time to develop solutions which can be built from the ground up, instead of being imposed from the top down.

A better approach would be to work productively and transparently with first nations; work with first nations governments to develop their own laws and the administrative support for their operation; work with first nations governments and citizens on the full spectrum of approaches, legislative and non-legislative, to family law. Where federal legislation is required, first nations should be brought to the table to help in the drafting of a bill that can obtain a much broader consensus. The government should engage in that intensive consultation that is required.

To that end, I would like to give the government the time it needs to work cooperatively with first nations on the complicated issue of matrimonial real property. That is why I move:

That the motion be amended by deleting all the words after the word "That" and substituting the following:

"Bill C-8, An Act respecting family homes situated on First Nation reserves and matrimonial interests or rights in or to structures and lands situated on those reserves, be not now read a second time but that it be read a second time this day six months hence".

• (1200)

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): The motion is receivable.

Questions and comments? The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

Mr. John Duncan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would like to express my supreme disappointment at the hoist motion put forward by the Liberal critic on aboriginal affairs. There was no signal that this would happen. The committee has been planning and preparing for witnesses for testimony. The same opposition party, in the last Parliament, expressed every desire to get this bill before committee and it has now done just the opposite.

Contrary to what the member said, there have been all kinds of consultations. There were 103 consultations across Canada during this process.

The member talked about the drafting of Bill C-28, the amendments to the Cree-Naskapi Act, and the responsible approach that was taken. That same approach was taken on the development of this bill. A draft proposal was shared with the Assembly of First Nations, the Native Women's Association of Canada and others. Millions of dollars were spent on consultations leading up to and including the development of this. We have heard from a number of vulnerable first nations women who supported this initiative.

The member talked about the United Nations. The UN committee on economic, social and cultural rights slammed Canada in 1998 and then again in 2006 for not giving aboriginal women the same rights on reserve as those off. The same goes for the UN human rights committee in 2006, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people in 2004, the UN special rapporteur on adequate housing in 2007, and the list goes on.

Why is the member for Labrador taking such precipitous action with no notice and with obvious negative consequences for vulnerable people? This legislation is long overdue.

• (1205)

Mr. Todd Russell: Madam Speaker, this motion is firm. It is rooted in the discussions and in the consultations in the broader sense that we have had with the first nations women and first nations families. Not one individual or group has come forward to support sending Bill C-8 to committee. If we are going to be honest about how we go forward with aboriginal people, if we are going to walk that path together, we must honour their voices and the direction they give to us as parliamentarians.

I can say to the member that it is fine to talk about human rights. Last year the government used aboriginal women, and I will say this very clearly, and put them in the window and said that it wanted to repeal section 67 of the Canadian Human Rights Act, the exemption.

When that came into force, there was a case brought to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal against the Government of Canada by first nations. What did the government do? It said that the Human Rights Tribunal had no jurisdiction. It talks about rights but it does not put it into practice.

I have no responsibility to give notice but when I spoke with people in the department and in the minister's office I have indicated to them that we did not support Bill C-8. They asked if Bill C-8 would go to second reading and I said that there was no assurance today that it would go to committee anytime soon.

We have listened to what the first nations people have told us and we have respected what they have told us. We look forward to the government's response to moving now to put the right processes in place to make the changes that are necessary to fill the gap we all want filled.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Madam Speaker, centuries ago, with the arrival of Europeans to the Americas, the devastation of our first nations, the indigenous people, began.

Many of those first nations are no longer with us and those who are often live in horrible conditions. Even in the last century, under the guise of enlightenment, we put in place paternalistic programs, such as the residential schools program for which we finally tried to make amends a year ago in this House of Commons.

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I would like to thank the member for Labrador. In many ways he is a conduit for the aspirations, for the very hopes of our first nations people in Canada. He provides tremendous first-hand insight into the feelings of our first nations and the fears they have. Today he is sounding the alarm. He has stated that there is alarm among our first nations that Bill C-8 has not been a cooperative and inclusive approach, that we are harking back to those days of paternalistic approaches.

If we do not take the time to embrace a consultative process, what, in his opinion, would be the consequence to our first nations?

• (1210)

Mr. Todd Russell: Madam Speaker, we can only look at what the consequences have been of a colonialist, paternalistic, assimilationist approach: poverty and health outcomes. There is not one outcome where aboriginal people are ahead of the rest of the Canadian population. They have substandard housing, high unemployment, high suicide rates and a massive number of children in care. Some estimate it to be 27,000 people in care with first nations and non-first nations agencies.

This is what the imposed approach, the colonialist, assimilationist approach has done. On June 11 of last year, there was an apology. The apology was supposed to mean something: a way of doing business differently and a way of approaching our relationship with aboriginal people differently.

All of the comments I have heard around Bill C-8, the first nations people say that this reminds them of when they had Indian agents decades ago. It reminds them of the imposition of legislation that has caused this poverty, this breakdown in families and the lack of housing.

My hon. colleague is right. It is about content but it also about process. If we do not get the process right, the content means diddly-squat, to be quite honest. We need to get both right in order for it to be effective.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Winnipeg South, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am not surprised at all by the motion put forward by the member for Labrador. It is indicative of past behaviour by the Liberal Party. We worked quite diligently in the aboriginal affairs committee in the past to extend the Canadian Human Rights Act to first nations people and he and his party stood in the way of that at every opportunity.

Today, for him to essentially quash extending matrimonial real property rights to first nations women, does not surprise me either.

Does the member for Labrador actually support extending the opportunity to first nations women to remain in their marital home should their marriage break down?

Mr. Todd Russell: Madam Speaker, what a foolish question. I will take no lessons from the member for Winnipeg South. I have been fighting for the rights of aboriginal peoples for the last 12 to 15 years. I have protested and I have been arrested.

I will listen to the voices of the aboriginal women, not the voices of the member for Winnipeg South or the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development who wants to impose his legislation. I will listen to the voices of women who say that there is a better way to resolve the issue of matrimonial real property on reserves.

If the Conservatives want to respect women, if they want to talk about rights being extended to all women, families and first nations, they should follow that particular process and listen to the voices of women.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Madam Speaker, we are discussing an extremely important bill. I, too, am somewhat surprised by my Liberal colleague's position. I do not think that his is the right approach just now, particularly when it comes to the matrimonial rights of aboriginal peoples. This bill has gone by several numbers, of which I will list just two. Bill C-47 died on the order paper last year when the election was called, and now we have Bill C-8.

The Bloc Québécois believes, and I hope the NDP will agree, that this bill should be studied in committee. It is of utmost importance that this bill be debated, analyzed and closely examined with witnesses by the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. Allow me to explain.

I am aware of the rules of Parliament. By presenting an amendment to delay study of the bill for six months, the Liberal Party knows full well that the bill will die on the order paper. I am absolutely certain that that is not what aboriginal women want. They want respect, and the Bloc Québécois believes that aboriginal women will get respect if we study the matter of matrimonial rights respectfully once and for all.

I hope that my Conservative Party colleagues will not take it for granted that our support for Bill C-8 is firm and unconditional. I want to say right now that we really do not like Bill C-8, not one bit. It does have some good points and measures, but some things in the bill are just not well thought out. If the government is serious about this, and I hope that it is, it will understand that we want to take as much time as we need in committee to properly study this bill, pick it apart and amend it as necessary. This bill must meet the needs of aboriginal women, first nations and aboriginal peoples across the country.

The government will have to explain why it set aside the main recommendations made by Ms. Grant-John, who did an exceptional job of examining this issue. The issue of matrimonial rights has been around for a number of years. With all due respect, the Liberals do not have a leg to stand on when criticizing the Conservatives at this stage regarding Bill C-8. It was the Liberals who introduced the famous Bill C-31 on women's matrimonial rights, the 1985 bill that erased women's rights in their entirety in one fell swoop. They should remember that the bill languished. Although the Conservatives adopted the bill, it originated with the Liberals some time before that.

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It is odd because the Liberals know this. An extremely interesting ruling was just handed down by the Court of Appeal. It concerns the rights of aboriginal peoples, especially women's rights. This ruling was handed down on April 6, 2009.

•(1215)

The government will have to take it into account because the British Columbia Court of Appeal ruling overturns several decisions and forces the government to recognize that it imposed a law that discriminated against aboriginal peoples.

In the matter at hand—and we will come to an agreement rather quickly—it is clear that 90% to 95% of the matrimonial rights cases concern women and children in native communities. It is equally clear that the rights of women have been violated. In my opinion, moving forward and adopting the amendment would kill the bill. With all due respect for my colleague from Labrador, and based on my extensive experience, I know that unless the government is forced to act it will not do so. In this case, it is not true that there will be further consultations if we give the government six more months. That is not true. I do not buy it.

We in the Bloc Québécois prefer to move forward, and I hope that my NDP colleagues will feel the same way. I hope that what I am about to say will be well translated and that our friends opposite will understand me clearly. I have just one hope, and that is that they do not seriously believe we are going to pass this bill in a rush and study it quickly in committee. It will take months. I hope they realize that, because if they do not, then there will be trouble. But that is very clear.

I have a few questions. Why is it that Ms. Grant-John's entire report was set aside?

Why is it that none of the recommendations made by the rapporteur, Ms. Corbett, were acted on?

It is odd, because I was looking for support for this bill among aboriginal women in Canada and in Quebec, but both groups said no. I spoke this morning with Grand Chief Picard, who also has problems with this bill. But I will give it a chance.

In my opinion, the Bloc Québécois, probably with the support of the NDP, will be willing to refer this very, very important bill to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development so that it is studied properly in the interest of the rights of women living in aboriginal communities. This problem has existed in aboriginal communities for too long, and we must find solutions. For my part, I believe, with all due respect, that having a minority government is not a bad thing.

We have seen evidence of this. I will give my colleagues opposite the chance to respond. I will quickly give a brief history of Bill C-21, which was passed during the previous session. This bill repealed section 67 of the Indian Act. As a result, aboriginal communities will now be accountable, and complaints can be filed against them with the Human Rights Commission.

Our Conservative colleagues opposite were opposed to all the amendments we had made to the bill. The original bill consisted of just one clause. When it came out of committee, was reported in this House and was passed, it included 12 or 13 clauses. I was very

closely involved in the study of the bill, and I can tell you that it was thanks to the aboriginal communities and all the members of the committee that we were able to seriously amend Bill C-21 so that it respected the rights of aboriginal peoples.

I have a problem with hoisting this bill. In my opinion, we need to study it and make amendments, and we need especially to heed the protests of the aboriginal women who were not consulted.

•(1220)

There is a Supreme Court decision about consultation with respect to Supreme Court rulings. If this is the case, I do not believe, with all due respect for my colleagues across the way, that such consultation has taken place. They could have taken a few more months. We will set the process in motion during those months and it will take the time it needs to take. The Bloc Québécois wants to see this bill amended to take the rights of aboriginal women on reserves into consideration.

The situation can be easily summarized. An aboriginal couple marries, has children and accumulates assets on reserve. They might, for instance, own a convenience store, a service station or some other business. The couple separates. The woman leaves the marital home, as usually happens, unfortunately, and leaves the reserve. She settles in town or somewhere else. Then comes the issue of who owns the convenience store, the garage or the business. They are located on the reserve and thus on federal territory. The situation is not clear.

The Bloc Québécois wants to examine this bill. A lot of work has been done on it by the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, and they have sent recommendations to us. I have read them and I believe that they need to be taken into consideration because a number of Mohawk communities, and probably some others as well, have what is called a matrimonial property rights tribunal. These are in place in the communities and we must respect what is being done in the communities. We need to take steps to ensure that we respect what is already in place, but the bill as it stands is not clear about this. What is more, the government seems to want to have a degree of control over the settlement of matrimonial property rights on the reserves, but I must admit this is not clear. If the regulations do not work, the federal government could change them. I believe I read that. If the government wants to go ahead with this, there is going to be a serious problem.

However, I want to point out that matrimonial rights have a huge impact on communities. Often, the women and children wind up with nothing and are expelled from the reserve, while the men keep everything. I do not want to generalize, but I would say that this is what happens in 80% or 90% of cases. I know, because I live in Abitibi-Témiscamingue and I have a good idea of what is happening in my communities. We must not be blind or ignore what is happening. We need to pay attention and take into account individual and collective rights.

There will be a serious debate about collective versus individual rights. This bill is not clear. It deserves to be debated and examined in greater detail. I will say to my Liberal colleagues, as I said at the start, that the worst that could happen would be that, if the committee is not happy with the responses and if the amendments we propose are not incorporated, we kill the bill. The three opposition parties can kill the bill, obviously. The government will have to understand that it is in its interest to respect what aboriginal communities want, which is not to be pushed around. They want to be heard. The main groups want to be heard and want to have a chance to speak.

I have asked that they propose amendments. We will have to look at the clauses. I know that aboriginal communities and groups, the Native Women's Association and the Assembly of First Nations of Canada may be opposed to the bill as it currently stands.

• (1225)

In life, it is not enough just to be opposed to something. You have to come up with solutions to the problem. When a party is opposed to the bill, I respect its position. But what solutions does it have? What amendments does it propose? This bill also raises the whole debate about incorporating provincial and territorial laws. The problem of respecting women's rights has never been easy to solve, and it will not be easy to solve with Bill C-8.

But if we do not make the effort to sit down all together at the same table to discuss, amend and adapt this bill so that it respects women's rights, we will miss the boat and pay the price. I especially do not want to be pushed around on this issue. I want us to take our time and study this bill carefully, and I want us to listen to the groups that propose amendments that we will study and analyze. I hope that the government does not think that this bill will be passed before the end of the current session. If it does, then we will have a serious problem.

This is a very important bill. Bill C-21 repealed section 67 of the Indian Act. We took the time we needed, and we did things properly. We also passed a bill about specific claims. We took the time to talk to aboriginal communities and aboriginal association representatives. This is a good bill that should satisfy aboriginal communities.

This morning, the committee—and I am in a position to know—passed Bill C-28 without amendment, or rather, with a small amendment concerning syntax. The bill should be back before the House when we return from the Victoria Day recess or, in our case, the fête des Patriotes. We passed the bill, and the Cree people are satisfied. It took 10 years, but now it is done. I am not suggesting that it will take 10 years to pass Bill C-8, but I think that it will take a few months. We have to take the time to listen to aboriginal community representatives. Important things, such as federal legislation on matrimonial property and recognition of the jurisdiction of first nations, must be taken into account. How will we do that?

I will end with a discussion of a principle that I believe in: if one wants what one has never had, one must be prepared to do what one has never done.

We are about to do something that we have never done: respect aboriginal women. That is what we will do as we study the bill in the

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Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development over the next few months.

• (1230)

[*English*]

Mr. John Duncan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to assure the Bloc member, who is a member of the standing committee, that the Conservative Party is not going to take the Bloc position for granted. I want to also assure my colleague that the government is committed to this legislation. The minister made this very clear when he spoke to the bill recently.

My colleague made statements about the ministerial representative. I would like to ensure that people are well aware that the ministerial representative's final report contained 64 conclusions and recommendations, many related to broad issues and non-legislative matters, while 33 recommendations related specifically to the content of the proposed legislation, and 30 of those 33 recommendations are addressed in the bill in a manner consistent with her recommendations.

I noticed that the member talked considerably about collective rights and individual rights. He made a very significant point. Does the member believe that the most vulnerable individuals in the community, mainly women, will come publicly and individually to support Bill C-8 when their views are contrary to their leadership and their political groups?

• (1235)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development for his excellent question.

In response, to give a straight answer, I do not know. There is no way of knowing based on what we have before us today. That is why we want aboriginal women to appear before the committee to explain the problem and tell us what they recommend. We must take those recommendations into account before we move ahead on this matter.

Right now, I am not at all convinced that the government has taken the requests of aboriginal women, either collectively or individually, into account in drafting this bill. Although we do not really support this bill outright, we will vote in favour of it so it may be sent to committee. However, I would like to hear from aboriginal women affected by this problem.

[*English*]

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I listened with interest to the speech of my colleague from the Bloc Québécois. I found it very interesting considering that this is such a flawed piece of legislation.

I believe he, more than most in the House, understands how narrow and how prescriptive amendments to a particular piece of legislation can be. There have been other examples of a piece of legislation in the House being scrapped because it was fundamentally flawed. Sometimes a piece of legislation is referred to committee after first reading to allow for greater and broader amendments. None of that was agreed to.

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I have talked to aboriginal people and organizations. The AFM had a resolution. I spoke to the AFNQL and the AFN Women's Council in Quebec. All have said they oppose Bill C-8. Not one of them said the bill should go to committee to try and get some amendments. That is what they wanted. We tried to respond to the wants and needs and aspirations of aboriginal people. We are telling the government that it has time to work with them to do something better and bring it back to the House.

We cannot give the government six more months because not much will be done and then keep the bill in committee for a year. It is time to listen to aboriginal people and stop playing politics with this legislation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay: Madam Speaker, although I respect my colleague, I do not agree with him. I think we should study this bill, and the leaders of those organizations must also understand that women have rights. Clearly, many women are afraid. They will probably be afraid to come and testify; I do not know yet, but one thing is certain: if we do nothing, they will continue to live in fear. Women will continue to be denigrated and lose even more rights in aboriginal communities.

I want us to be able to meet with them. It is not true that consultations are going to be held, and if we block this bill now, there would be none in the future.

This bill will force the government to take action, if we amend it based on the rights of aboriginal women, and of course, our respect for them.

• (1240)

[*English*]

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am speaking today to the motion to adjourn debate on Bill C-8 for six months. I, too, will recommend that the NDP not support the motion to amend and that we work toward getting the bill to committee.

It is a very difficult decision. I believe Bill C-8 on matrimonial real property is a deeply flawed legislation. However, it is well past time to work toward solutions. We simply cannot, in good conscience, continue to leave this matter unresolved. I want to explain why I say that.

We have a long, sad and sorry history when it comes to matrimonial real property rights in Canada. Sadly, it reflects on both past Conservative governments and past Liberal governments. This is an occasion where both governing parties hold full responsibility for not taking earlier action.

I want to review a historical timeline so Canadians are well aware of the fact that this issue has had debate after debate and report after report, and we have failed to move toward any kind of solution. It is largely women and children who are impacted by this lack of action, but men and women continue to suffer in aboriginal communities. They do not have any legitimate legal recourse to see an appropriate division of the matrimonial home.

When I talk about the historical timeline, there are a couple of key points. I think this is a good reminder. Prior to colonization, first

nations' cultural norms, kinship systems and laws determined the outcomes of marriage breakdown. Matriarchal kinship systems and egalitarian values were common. We have a history where, prior to contact and colonialism, first nations had their own rules and regulations when families disbanded.

Part of what first nations have been demanding is a recognition of those laws and customs. First nations will say that they are fully intent on honouring charter obligations in every respect. However, there is a long history. First nations occupied this land for thousands of years. They had developed systems to deal with marital breakdown.

Many things happened during the colonial period. The notion of individual property rights and male domination in property and civil rights were introduced by colonial governments in an effort to assimilate first nations people, with the hopes of ultimate eliminating reserves altogether. One sees this transition from laws that had been in place for thousands of years to a colonial period, where first nations were severely impacted by a notion of male domination. Many of the kinship and matriarchal systems were disbanded.

Post-Confederation, we had Indian legislation. There was a whole series of things, but first nations women were not permitted to vote in band council elections. There was gender-based discrimination in wills and estate laws. Throughout this period, the notion of equality rights did not exist in Canadian law. Women on and off reserve had very few legal protections from matrimonial property and were at a significant legal disadvantage compared to men. The Indian Act does not address matrimonial property rights.

Finally, in 1986, people started to wake up. Again, this is in the context of why we should not abandon debate. Court cases that took place 1986 finally said that things had to change. Two cases concerning the extent to which provincial laws and matrimonial property might be applied to individual interest in reserve lands reached the Supreme Court of Canada. One of them was *Derrickson v. Derrickson*. The other was *Paul v. Paul*.

The Supreme Court decided that provincial laws could not apply in any way that would change any individual property interest that a first nation person may hold under the Indian Act. Further, it went on to say:

Silence of the Indian Act and the non-recognition of First Nation jurisdiction on the matter means many basic protections not available to male or female spouses on reserves; women are particularly negatively impacted by the legislative gap because they still are more often the primary caregivers of young children.

•(1245)

Twenty-three years ago Supreme Court rulings indicated that the federal government was allowing provincial law to erroneously apply on reserve and that there needed to be a federal resolution to recognize the special status on reserve. This is one of the primary reasons New Democrats believe we need to get this to committee so we can talk about the availability of other solutions. What proposals are the men and women in first nations communities putting forward?

We have the national organizations, but there are other voices in these communities to which we need to listened. We know some customary laws are already in place. Let us take a look at some of those examples.

From 1990 to the present, and again this is the sad history, eight United Nations human rights bodies have expressed concern about the issue of matrimonial real property on reserves. Internationally we are being pointed to for this lack of movement on matrimonial real property. Litigation on lack of protection for matrimonial real property rights is launched by a first nations women's organization. Women's organizations have been saying they need solutions to this.

In 2003 the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights issued its first report calling for legislative action on the question, consultations with first nations and first nations organizations.

In 2005 the House of Commons Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development issued a report calling for legislative action on the question and recognized the inherent rights of first nations respecting matrimonial real property.

In 2006 the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women took up the issue of matrimonial real property on reserves and it continues to monitor it.

In that context, with so many different bodies, both internationally and within Canada, calling for us to move towards some action, I believe it is important. The Liberal member talked about playing politics. It is important that we do not play politics with this matter and that we take the opportunity to get it to committee so we can call in witnesses from across the country, so we do not play politics with it.

I want to refer back to the government response to the fifth report of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, this was AANO 38-1. It talked about the fact that since 2001, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has done significant research and has produced a number of publications on the issue of matrimonial real property, including a comprehensive discussion paper to better understand the issues from a sociological and legal perspective.

Since all of this work has already been done, it seems important that we look at it, that we look at the sociological and legal perspectives and that we look at some of the proposals that have come forward.

I want to turn to some international reports I had cited. I quoted from one within Canada. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination issued a report on this, and this is the context

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for why we should debate this motion and the bill and get it to committee for a fuller review. It states:

The Committee notes with regret the lack of substantial progress made by the State party in its efforts to address residual discrimination against First Nations women and their children in matters relating to Indian status, band membership and matrimonial real property on reserve lands, despite its commitment to resolving this issue through a viable legislative solution...

The Committee urges the State party to take the necessary measures to reach a legislative solution to effectively address the discriminatory effects of the Indian Act on the rights of Aboriginal women and children to marry, to choose one's spouse, to own property and to inherit, in consultation with First Nations organisations and communities, including aboriginal women's organisations, without further delay.

Once again, an UN report notes the lack of movement and the lack of action in Canada. I do not know how many more reports we need to have to say that we need to take action.

•(1250)

The Liberal member suggested that we put this in abeyance for six months. This is referred to as a hoist motion, which effectively kills the legislation. I have no faith that during the six months this bill is on the back burner, we will see the kinds of consultation required to ensure the bill will meet the needs of first nations women and men.

I want to talk about consultation. That is part of the challenge of the bill before us. The government claims that there was consultation. However, when we hear from the organizations tasked with doing the so-called consultation, their feedback has been it simply has not been consultation. It has been discussion and perhaps education. However, it does not meet the terms of what has been set out as meaningful consultation.

I want to refer to recommendation 18 that came from the "Report of the Ministerial Representative of Matrimonial Real Property Issues on Reserves". Her report was supposed to be the precursor to this legislation. However, most of her recommendations were not included in the legislation. It is not that New Democrats think this legislation will solve the problems. We think this is an opportunity to look at other solutions.

I want to quote from the report about consultation. It states:

The Department should develop, as soon as possible, specific policies and procedures relating to consultation in order to ensure that future consultation activities can identify and discharge any legal duty to consult while also fulfilling objectives of good governance and public policy by:

- 1) Ensuring First Nations have relevant information to the issues for decision in a timely manner;
- 2) Providing an opportunity for First Nations to express their concerns and views on potential impacts of the legislative proposal and issues relating to the existence of a duty to consult;
- 3) Listening to, analyzing and seriously considering the representations and concerns of First Nations in the context of relevant legal and policy principles including their relationship to other constitutional and human rights principles;
- 4) Ensuring proper analyses by the Department of Justice of section 35 issues relating to any proposed legislative initiative are thoroughly canvassed before, during and after consultations;
- 5) Seriously considering proposals for mitigating potentially negative impacts on aboriginal and treaty rights or other rights and interests of First Nations and making necessary accommodations by changing the government's proposal
- 6) Establishing, in consultation with First Nations, a protocol for the development of legislative proposals.

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That is a clearly outlined process of what consultation should look like, and we know that is not what happened in the development of Bill C-8.

Witnesses coming before a committee should not be constituted as consultation. The duty to consult rests between the government and first nations. It is not the responsibility of the aboriginal affairs committee to conduct the consultation on behalf of the government.

However, the committee can bring forward solutions and recommendations, which the government can choose to adopt. It does not prevent the government from withdrawing the current legislation and developing legislation that more accurately reflects the concerns and the proposed solutions, which we know first nations communities and organizations will bring forward.

I know we are debating the hoist motion rather than the actual legislation at this point, but part of the challenge we face with the legislation is the difficulties of implementing it in communities.

I want to again come back to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. People say that the legislation will solve the problems around matrimonial real property in communities, and that is simply untrue. What it will do is provide a legal mechanism to determine the division of the matrimonial home, but it will not provide solutions to the severe housing crisis that exists on most reserves across the country.

In its report of 2007, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women said that it remained concerned at the extent of the dramatic inequity in living standards still experienced by aboriginal peoples.

• (1255)

In this regard the committee, recognizing the importance of the right of indigenous peoples to own, develop, control and use their lands, territories and resources in relationship to their enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, regrets that in its reports the state party did not address the question of limitations imposed on the use by aboriginal people of their land, as previously requested by the committee. The committee also notes that the state party has yet to fully implement the 1996 recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples:

In the light of article 5 e) and of general recommendations 23 (1997) on the rights of indigenous peoples, the Committee urges the State party to allocate sufficient resources to remove the obstacles that prevent the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by Aboriginal peoples. The Committee also once again requests that the State party provide information on the limitations imposed on the use by Aboriginal people of their land, in its next periodic report, and that it fully implement the 1996 recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples without further delay.

Again, in the context of this delaying motion, the reason it is important to talk about matrimonial real property is that it is urgent that at the committee we also talk about non-legislative solutions and what is really needed to support families on reserve, whether it is adequate housing, access to education or access to conflict resolution and mediation that could actually prevent family breakup.

In the report on the first nations child and family services program, the Auditor General talked about the fact that there is so little investment in preventive measures that children are being removed from their homes. The agencies have a mandate to remove

children, but they do not have a mandate to support families, keep those families together and keep the children in their homes.

I would argue that rather than delay talking about these very serious issues, we should welcome the opportunity to talk about non-legislative options. We should welcome the opportunity to talk about what kind of housing is needed on reserve to support families. If a family does need to break up, the reality right now is that women and children can be forced to leave their reserve, their home community because there is not any housing for them.

I find it difficult to support the delay of talking about these very serious fundamental human rights issues. I would suggest that first nations communities from coast to coast to coast do have some solutions that would be welcomed by all members of the House.

I am running out of time, but I want to touch on a couple of other issues. Several first nations organizations across this country are working on issues around citizenship. That is fundamental to what we are talking about. Who gets to determine who has citizenship in a particular nation? I know that Six Nations and NAN are working on citizenship codes. This would be an opportunity to bring forward those citizenship codes to the committee in the context of matrimonial real property. Fundamentally, that is what we are talking about. We are talking about who has a right to live on reserve, who has a right to the house, and who has a right to that citizenship.

Perhaps it will also give us an opportunity to talk about the 1985, Bill C-31, which reinstated the citizenship of women who married non-aboriginal men and lost their citizenship. But of course there were not the non-legislative solutions to deal with the housing issues these women were facing.

This is an opportunity to have a much broader discussion on human rights, on the aspects that are impacting on families, on the more creative solutions, the more respectful solutions, the more traditional solutions that would serve first nations and their families in a reasonable fashion.

I believe it is important that we get the bill to committee for a full discussion.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Madam Speaker, I thank the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan for her eloquent and concise remarks on the bill this afternoon, and in particular on the hoist amendment, as it is referred to.

On that point, the Liberals have moved what is known as a six month hoist amendment. It would appear they do not have the courage and directness to vote against the bill at second reading. To be clear, it really means that they want to kill the bill.

As a point of background, I want to quote from the procedural compendium for the benefit of other hon. members: "The adoption of a hoist amendment is tantamount to defeating the bill by postponing its consideration. Consequently, the bill disappears from the order paper and cannot be introduced again, even after the postponement period has elapsed".

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Let us be clear, this is a motion on the part of the Liberal Party to end discussion on this particular bill. I wonder if the member might comment on why the Liberal Party is against expanded rights for women and children, particularly on reserve?

• (1300)

Ms. Jean Crowder: Madam Speaker, the member serves as chair of the aboriginal affairs committee, and I would like to compliment him on his fair and even-handed approach in that committee.

There is no question that there are some very serious problems with Bill C-8. The NDP's speaking against the hoist motion is not tantamount to full support for the bill; it is a statement that New Democrats believe the injustice against women and children and families on reserve has gone on far too long.

It is now 23 years after that court case in 1986, and we still do not have any resolution. I believe this is the third time the bill has been introduced in the House to attempt to deal with this. They were all deeply flawed bills. I believe we need to get the legislation to committee to consider some of those solutions we know are there in first nations communities.

When we talk about playing politics with the lives of women and children and their families, I believe it is time to put that aside. Perhaps all parties could come to the table to look at those solutions that will actually make a difference in the lives of women and children in their communities.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I know the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan is a passionate proponent of rights, but I am very concerned that she believes she can support the bill. Does she support a bill that is called a racist bill by the first nations organizations? What I am reading from their notes to me is that it is an imposition, it is colonialism.

It is a bill that is contrary to the recommendation of the comprehensive report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which was tabled in 1996. It is a bill that violates the jurisdictional rights of the first nations. Women are saying it is offensive, that their rights are being undermined and that they have not been consulted. Some 60% of the population has not been consulted.

Does the member feel comfortable supporting a bill that is so flawed that aboriginal women do not like the bill? Would she support a bill when the appearance of addressing the term "women's issues", which is being used by the Conservatives to make everyone kowtow to the bill, has failed to deal with numerous and substantial problems facing women, which are violence, adequate housing, poor health, et cetera? I would like her response.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Madam Speaker, I do not know how to be any more clear about this. Our willingness at this point is to debate the bill at committee in an attempt to seek solutions.

The member and her party have known about this for decades, and they have refused to take any meaningful action. If they were concerned about human rights in the 13 years that they were in power, why did they not bring forward a piece of legislation?

This is an opportunity. Again, the bill is fundamentally flawed. I would agree that there are serious problems with it, but I do not

know how many more decades we should put off taking a look at the egregious human rights violations that are facing us in Canada.

I am hearing the member and her party say they are prepared to effectively kill the bill so we do not have this discussion. I think we need to air it in public. Committee meetings are open to the entire country. We can have witnesses from all parts of this country talk about their solutions. They can talk about what is wrong with the bill.

I think we should quit having this take place virtually behind closed doors. We need to have a full and public airing of potential solutions so we are dealing with these human rights issues instead of burying it for another six months.

• (1305)

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan for her totally honest and realistic assessment about what is going on here.

The member for Nanaimo—Cowichan could not have made it any clearer. Clearly the bill is flawed, but at the same time we do not want to lose the opportunity to make sure this goes to committee and that the issue is finally addressed.

I would like to thank the member for having the courage to not get into playing politics and making sure the issue stays front and centre, which it needs to be. I have a lot of faith that she and other members of the committee, if it gets to committee, will actually be able to address the issues.

I know that the Native Women's Association of Canada has been critical of the bill, but it is one organization that could come to the committee and not only deal with the bill but the underlying issues that the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan has outlined so well today.

I wonder if she could elaborate on those other issues that need to be brought into this debate.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Madam Speaker, we know the Native Women's Association of Canada is not supporting Bill C-8. We also know that the Native Women's Association of Canada has some of those concrete solutions I have been talking about. It has some very good suggestions around non-legislative options, for example. It is also fully aware that without housing, for example, the bill itself will not deal with some of the other pressures on families without the recognition of customary laws, without support for mediation and dispute resolution, without appropriate consultation.

Perhaps the committee would agree to put the bill on hold, and we have done this on other pieces of legislation, to do a more fulsome consultation process.

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Fortunately we have the ministerial representative's report that lays out what a consultation process could look like. I think it could be a win for people, for first nations women and children, if the committee could recommend a full consultation process that would look at adequate changes.

However, by simply shelving the bill for six months, we do not get an opportunity to talk about any of that. We do not get an opportunity to have the Native Women's Association of Canada come before the committee to talk about what is wrong with the bill and how it could be improved and how consultations could be put into place that would be appropriate.

I welcome the opportunity, if the bill should get to committee, to have an opportunity to deal with these very serious human rights violations taking place in Canada as we speak.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Madam Speaker, government ministers have repeatedly claimed that the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is incompatible with the Canadian Constitution and Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However on May 1, 2008, a group of more than 100 Canadian lawyers, scholars and other experts published an open letter that described the government's claims as erroneous and misleading.

Could the hon. member comment on this inconsistency and how Bill C-8 fails to meet the criteria of the declaration?

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): The hon. member has 30 seconds to respond.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Madam Speaker, 30 seconds should give me an opportunity to quote from article 18, which states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.

I would argue that we could talk—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): Resuming debate, the hon. member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Madam Speaker, on behalf of aboriginal women on two reserves in my riding of Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, I want to voice my support for Bill C-8, the family homes on reserves and matrimonial interests or rights act.

The bill offers a practical effective solution to the long list of legal and technical issues related to on-reserve matrimonial real property. These issues have been the focus of much study, consultation and discussion in recent years. A review of the many published reports reveals several common themes and recommendations for action. These ideas helped shape the legislation now before us and, taken in their entirety, are a compelling, even overwhelming, argument for voting in favour of Bill C-8.

While other hon. members addressing the legislation have focused primarily on technical issues, I will adopt a different approach. I propose to outline the key findings of recent matrimonial real property research and consultation and link them to Bill C-8. This approach will demonstrate the considerable value of the legislation now before us.

I will begin with the findings of several United Nations committees. Canada is an active participant not only in the United Nations itself but also in several UN conventions and organizations. A report published in November 2005 by the United Nations Human Rights Committee touches on the issue of matrimonial real property. Among the report's recommendations is one which suggests that Canada:

—should, in consultation with Aboriginal peoples, adopt measures ending discrimination actually suffered by Aboriginal women in matters of reserve membership and matrimonial property, and consider this issue as a high priority.

A second body, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, issued a similar call to action. This group called on Canada to develop a solution in consultation with the communities concerned.

Of course, there is also a long history of calls for reform from within Canada. In 1988, for example, the province of Manitoba launched an inquiry into the justice system's treatment of aboriginal peoples. The inquiry's final report identified a host of issues, including the lack of an effective regime dealing with on-reserve MRP.

The 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples also examined the issue of matrimonial rights. The report recommended that:

Aboriginal nations or organizations consult with federal, provincial and territorial governments on areas of family law with a view to

(a) making possible legislative amendments to resolve anomalies in the application of family law to Aboriginal people and to fill current gaps...

While all of these reports included calls for a legislative solution to the issue of matrimonial property rights, there was, however, no clear consensus on how such legislation should be structured. Various options, such as amendments to the Indian Act, stand-alone legislation and the application of provincial and territorial laws have all been advanced.

Three parliamentary committees considered the challenges associated with potential legislative approaches to on-reserve matrimonial property rights.

The Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, for example, staged a series of hearings and published an interim report in 2003. The report, titled, "A Hard Bed to Lie In: Matrimonial Real Property on Reserve", included a number of pertinent recommendations, including legislation that would validate matrimonial laws developed and implemented by first nations. The report also called on government to transfer money to aboriginal women's groups for the purpose of conducting thorough consultations on the issue.

Three years later, the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development launched another study and considered the testimony of more than 30 witnesses. The committee's report, "Walking Arm-in-Arm to Resolve the Issue of On-Reserve Matrimonial Real Property", determined that, to be effective, MRP legislation must be developed in consultation and collaboration with first nations. The committee also stated that any legislation must balance individual equality rights and collective first nations rights.

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Recommendations for consultation and legislative change were echoed in the report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women in June 2006.

The guidance provided by parliamentarians expressed in the studies that I have cited forms the core of this government's strategy on matrimonial property rights. This government did in fact provide over \$8 million to the Native Women's Association of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations to carry out a consultation process. A ministerial representative was contracted to work with these two national aboriginal organizations, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, and additional stakeholders to help identify and analyze legislative options.

● (1310)

These consultations, along with the findings of the ministerial representative received in 2007, and further discussions, have all informed and provided a firm foundation for Bill C-8.

The solution before the House includes a mechanism for first nations to establish their own community specific matrimonial reserve property laws. This is particularly significant because it marks the first time that Parliament would recognize first nation laws in the area of matrimonial real property without qualification. There would be no ministerial powers on reserve and no opportunity for the minister to overturn first nation MRP laws.

Bill C-8 also honours calls to ensure that all first nations members have adequate input into the development of their communities' MRP laws.

Under the terms of the proposed legislation, a majority of eligible voters must vote on and endorse proposed MRP laws. This approach would also help to align each MRP law with community values and traditions.

The federal regime established by Bill C-8 would apply to those first nations that have not already established MRP laws through negotiated self-government agreements that deal with the administration of reserve lands or through the First Nations Land Management Act.

The federal regime would empower judges to order specific remedies, such as exclusive occupation orders. Under the legislation, first nations may make representations to the courts about the cultural, social and legal context relevant to most orders.

In accordance with what was heard during consultation sessions, the option of simply incorporating provincial or territorial laws regarding MRP to apply on reserves, which had been the subject of a private member's bill in an earlier Parliament, was discarded. Furthermore, non-members of a first nation would not be able to use the provisions of the proposed legislation to gain ownership of reserve lands.

Finally, Bill C-8 respects an opinion expressed repeatedly during the consultation sessions and featured prominently in the ministerial representative's final report, that the legislation must balance individual rights and the collective rights of first nation communities.

Bill C-8 proposes to fill an intolerable legislative gap that has existed for far too long. The solution contained in the legislation is

both comprehensive and workable. It is the product of much research and consultation, and it responds to concerns and recommendations identified by the people likely to be most affected.

The proposed legislation offers a long overdue fix to an intolerable problem, and grants first nations the unprecedented power to develop their own laws in this area.

For these reasons, I will be voting in favour of Bill C-8. I urge all my hon. colleagues to join me in supporting this important legislation that would certainly benefit native women in my riding and many ridings across the country.

● (1315)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the member will know that the bill before us is the same bill that was before the House in the last Parliament.

He probably is also aware that the Assembly of First Nations passed a resolution not only saying that the bill was a bad bill and could not be remedied, but also called for the bill to be withdrawn before second reading even started.

I wonder if the member would care to explain what steps the government has taken to consult with first nations and also the aboriginal women's groups to determine what difficulties they have with the bill and why they support the bill being withdrawn or defeated.

Mr. Larry Miller: Madam Speaker, my colleague is interested in women's rights no matter what their racial background, and I am sure he supports them very much.

Any bill that comes up for debate in a territory, province or country seldom receives unanimous support. As I mentioned in my comments, there has been wide consultation. Some of the native women I have talked to in my riding support the bill.

I would point out to the hon. member across the way that just because a bill does not receive unanimous support does not mean it is not a good bill. He should consider that when he stands up to vote, I hope in favour of Bill C-8.

● (1320)

Mr. Paul Szabo: Madam Speaker, I cannot just sit here and allow that to stand. As was set out by the member for Labrador, there is no first nations group in the country that supports this bill. It is not a matter of whether or not there is unanimous support for the bill. The fact is it is unanimous to oppose, defeat and withdraw this bill.

From where is the member getting his information? Who gave him statements like that to mislead the House about the position of the AFN on a bill that is so bad it cannot even be repaired in the shape it is in? There has been no consultation whatsoever on this bill since it was in the last Parliament when the Assembly of First Nations passed a resolution telling the minister so. Then the minister came in here, made a speech at the end of the day and did not show up to take questions. That is the attitude of the government toward this bill and the Assembly of First Nations. The minister will not even take questions in the House of Commons on a bad bill.

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Mr. Larry Miller: Madam Speaker, as is quite traditional in the House, members who were in the House for years and years failed to get something done, but all of a sudden they are starting to recognize that was a bad mistake. I know my colleague across the way and his wife. I know he supports women's rights.

This bill will do something for aboriginal women that has never been done before. It is long overdue. It is time to quit talking about it. This government is going to do something about it.

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary for Official Languages, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to commend my colleague on making a great speech. I had to stand to say that what the member across the way said is absolutely not true.

I myself have met with a number of aboriginal women's groups. I myself am a Métis woman who spent almost 19 years policing. I have seen the devastating effects of what happens when women, particularly aboriginal women, do not have rights that allow them to have some property or a place to live when there are domestic problems. The children suffer.

North Point Douglas Women's Centre is a facility where my mother works. My mother is very active in the aboriginal community and very active with women's groups across my province of Manitoba. Many women from reserves have fled because of the fear they face.

I would ask my colleague if he could highlight the fact that we have worked very hard. Being tough on crime is something that we believe in. If he could, I would like him to highlight what kind of measures are being taken under this bill to protect those women who are in domestic situations and are fearful.

Mr. Larry Miller: Madam Speaker, I am going to use the opportunity to state how proud I am to have a colleague like the member for Saint Boniface in her role here as a parliamentarian. She is a proud member of her Métis community. I know that she fully supports women's rights.

Domestic violence has no boundaries. It occurs in every race and group across this country. It is an unfortunate thing, but it is a reality. This bill will give an aboriginal woman who is caught in a bad domestic situation rights equal to the member or any other woman in this country. That is something we should all be very proud to stand up for.

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank the member for his speech, although I fundamentally disagree with it.

What does he say to a group like the Native Women's Association of Canada which says that this bill is fundamentally flawed to a point that it should not go to committee? Do we pay any credence to that group's voice in this? They are women speaking for women. When one makes the argument that this is about women's rights and the extension of women's rights, should we not listen to those people who are most directly affected?

The Native Women's Association of Canada represents hundreds of thousands of people in all territories and provinces across this nation. Should we not listen to them and say that they have a legitimate point here, that we have listened to them and that we can do things differently? What does the member say to the Native Women's Association of Canada?

• (1325)

Mr. Larry Miller: Madam Speaker, even though the hon. member is on the other side of the House, I do have a lot of respect for him. I know he is very proud of his native background.

As we all know, governments consult across the country and, as I said in my opening remarks, that has been done to no end and it is time to act. As individual members, we also have the obligation to consult. As I indicated, I have two reserves in my riding and I have talked to a number of women there who wholeheartedly, 100%, support this bill. What I hear most is that it is long overdue.

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Madam Speaker, I had a delegation in Parliament the other day from a reserve in my riding. The chief was here with a delegation and some of the elder ladies were here voicing their opposition to this bill. However, in this same riding, I have had a great number of people off the same reserve who have requested that we seriously consider this.

Should this go to second reading and committee? Do we not have an obligation to bring forward ideas, thoughts, considerations and to hear valid arguments, and then come to a collective understanding? That takes courage.

Mr. Larry Miller: Madam Speaker, as I indicated earlier, we seldom ever have unanimous consent in this House and we certainly seldom get it from across the country, if at all, but that should not discourage us. We voted on some bills last night in this House and one or two of them did not have unanimous consent, but that did not stop them from passing second reading and going to committee. I believe that is the wise thing to do.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Etobicoke North.

I am pleased to speak to Bill C-8, An Act respecting family homes situated on First Nation reserves and matrimonial interests or rights in or to structures and lands situated on those reserves.

The bill was designed to create a regime to govern how property interests of married and common-law couples on first nation reserves would be divided after a breakdown of their marriage, but the government, when introducing the bill, misled the House by claiming that it had the approval or it consulted all aboriginal groups.

In my consultations with many native women's groups, both from Ontario and Quebec, they were appalled by the lack of consultation, the inflexibility of the consultation process and the fact that two large provinces that constitute over 50% of the aboriginal communities were left out of the consultation process.

Government Orders

We all know we do not question the need for legislation to address the very real problems when family breakdown occurs for Canadians living on reserves. However, the Conservative government failed in its constitutional duty to consult the aboriginal groups in the development of the bill.

I am appalled by the fact that NDP claims it will support the bill.

I come from the colonial era so I know what colonialism is and I can see the Conservatives moving toward that era. However, for a party that claims to support human rights, I am absolutely appalled when women themselves claim that this would violate the Human Rights Act and they have given me a litany of articles that have been violated.

I cannot understand why anyone would stand up and support the bill. If we leave this proposal on the table, there cannot be substantive changes or discussions because we limit the ability of the aboriginal communities to discuss or make substantive changes. The bill needs to be hoisted for six months and we are calling on the government to do it so that it can use its time to properly consult without forcing its own opinions on a community that has not been consulted.

The Native Women's Association of Canada has stated that this is not the right bill. As I was listening to the presentations, I heard the NDP say that this would allow the Native Women's Association to present. However, if it presents and there is a violation, 60% of the recommendations of the Grant report have not been addressed, it demands that these aboriginal women who are living on the reserves need to have those amendments made, how can the government claim that it will be able to amend this bad bill? A bad bill has to be thrown out. Therefore, it is important that we do consult.

Let us look at the history behind this. In 1986, during the era of the Mulroney Conservative government, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that when a conjugal relationship breaks down on reserves courts cannot apply provincial or territorial family law because reserve lands fall under federal jurisdiction. As a result, aboriginal women living on reserves have not enjoyed the same rights as women living off reserves. They are not entitled to an equal share of matrimonial property at the time of a marriage breakdown. Matrimonial real property, MRP, refers to the house or land that a couple lives on while they are married or in a common-law relationship.

Since the 1986 Supreme Court ruling, the gap in the law has had serious consequences. When a marriage or relationship ends, the courts have no authority to protect the MRP interests of spouses living on the reserve. As a result, spouses living on the reserves cannot ask the courts to grant an order for temporary or permanent possession of the family home even in a situation of domestic violence or when the spouse has custody of the children, or order partition or sale of the family home to enforce an order of compensation from one spouse or the other, or preclude a spouse from selling or mortgaging the family home without the consent of another spouse.

• (1330)

The Native Women's Association of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations have been highly critical of the bill. I would like to ask

all parliamentarians to listen as they represent the majority of the groups. If we do not want to listen to them and impose a bill on them, then what are we here for? We are living in an ivory tower trying to impose laws on people who have not been consulted and this is a violation of the fundamental constitutional rights of the aboriginal people.

They strenuously argue that the government failed to live up to its constitutional duty to consult first nations on a law that would directly impact their right to manage reserve lands. There is a concern for the first nations women and girls who are four times more likely to be physically or sexually assaulted than any other women in Canada. Their suicide rate is three times the national average as is their likelihood of contracting AIDS. They are less healthy, poorer and more likely to have addiction problems. There cannot be another group in Canada more vulnerable and with fewer alternatives than women living on reserves.

Why is the government and those who are supporting this bill supporting keeping native women in the back rooms, poorer and uneducated? The bill does not address their rights nor does it address any of the socio-economic problems.

In her report, the Auditor General stated that INAC, which did the consultation process, had no cultural sensitivity to the aboriginal communities and that the consultation that was done under INAC was not driven by consulting the larger groups of aboriginal communities. The "father knows best" is not an approach here. I think parliamentarians need to understand that when they bring in a bad bill they should have the will to apologize for the bad bill and withdraw it. Instead, they are putting themselves in a position of no return to the detriment of the aboriginal communities.

Many first nations communities have come to us to say that it is contrary to the RCAP, which is the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and that it violates their jurisdiction. They say that it is inconsistent with the inherent rights of self-government recognized in section 35(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982.

First nations people have the right to exercise their jurisdiction and govern themselves without federal legislation. I heard from the NDP member that they would be given the right to put forward whatever bills they have, but the NDP misses the point. The first nations consent is also required. The federal government takes the position that it consulted with the Assembly of First Nations and Native Women's Association of Canada, however, the duty to consult cannot be delegated and the obligation rests with the federal government to consult the rights holders, first nations communities and their representatives.

The other thing aboriginal groups have told us is that the bill violates the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and that Bill C-8 blatantly violates the following sections: article 3, article 5, article 8, article 21, article 22, article 27, article 33 and article 34.

Government Orders

With such a bad bill that has no support from any of the aboriginal communities, and I have the Grant report here, how does the government and the other opposition parties think that by sending the bill to committee they will be able to make any substantive changes? They will not.

• (1335)

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Madam Speaker, I listened very carefully to the member's comments, and frankly I am flabbergasted, knowing that she was in the House and asked the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan whether or not the NDP supported the bill and she got a clear answer from our aboriginal affairs critic that we do not support the bill, that she would now stand up, moments later, and completely misrepresent that.

Let us be very clear. The NDP is opposed to the hoist motion that is before us right now because we think there should be an opportunity for the committee to deal with the bill, change it, fix it and hear witnesses.

I am surprised to hear the member so blatantly misrepresent what she herself heard 20 minutes ago. I would like her to correct the record and go back to what she heard from the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan.

The second question I have for the member is this. I agree that this is an issue that is very critical and needs to be dealt with in a way that is respectful of first nations, but it kind of begs the question, if that is the case and if the member believes that, why on earth did the previous Liberal government leave it unresolved for 13 years?

That court decision was in 1986. If I remember correctly, the Liberals came back into office in 1993 and were there for the next 13 years. They did not deal with this issue. Today they are ready to abdicate the responsibility of the committee to deal with this issue. Maybe the member could comment on that.

• (1340)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. member for her question, but I think it reeks of hypocrisy.

Either the NDP is opposed to the bill or accepts the bill. In our parliamentary process, if we approve the bill now, and it is fundamentally flawed, it cannot be substantively changed in committee. Parliamentarians should know that and so too the hon. member because she has been in Parliament for a long time. Therefore, the debits and credits do not match.

If the hon. member opposes the bill, then she should vote against it and allow for proper consultation. That is the basic framework.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the issue that has just been raised is very fundamental. When we pass a bill at second reading, we do get approval in principle, the fundamental principle of the bill, and fundamental principles cannot be changed at committee. I know that the members who are suggesting we send it to committee are thinking that maybe this is a political opportunity to simply bring witnesses, try to embarrass the government, and demonstrate how bad it is. However, we can do that right now in debate.

I believe that we should not give any indication whatsoever that there is any form of support for this fundamentally flawed bill. I wonder if the member would care to comment on that.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Madam Speaker, I totally agree with the hon. member. This is a flawed bill. There is no support for the bill in aboriginal communities. All aboriginal communities have told us they do not agree with the bill. It is so flawed that it cannot be changed, including the principles of the bill. If any members are under the illusion that it can be substantially changed at committee, they are under a false pretext or they are hiding their heads in the sand. Let us reject the bill and ensure proper consultation takes place.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I support the amendment of my hon. colleague.

Although September 13, 2007, will be celebrated as a day when indigenous people and the United Nations moved to reconcile painful histories and resolved to move forward respecting human rights, it will not be remembered so here in Canada.

The UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by an overwhelming majority vote of 144 to 4 member states, opposed only by Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. It was the first time that Canada sought to be exempted from a human rights standard adopted by the General Assembly.

I am compelled to speak out against Bill C-8 as I strongly believe it is fundamentally flawed. It violates numerous provisions of the UN declaration, including control of membership in accordance with tradition, protection against cultural assimilation, and right to self-determination.

It is inconsistent with first nations' right to self-government, recognized in the Constitution, and is contrary to first nations' jurisdiction over family law, recognized in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

The government must not interfere in first nations' right to self-determination and must not attempt to justify its intrusion in any way, in this case saying the Indian Act does not address matrimonial property and provincial legislation does not apply. It is up to first nations to identify gaps in laws and address them as they see fit by their own law-making initiatives.

As it stands there is tremendous concern that Bill C-8 will undermine grassroots action and increase the legislative gap, not eliminate it.

Wendy Grant-John, the ministerial representative, tabled a report in 2007 that stated, "Unilateral, imposed federal legislation was not the proper way to proceed". Recent court cases support her conclusion, namely that the federal government cannot unilaterally enact legislation that has the potential to affect or infringe aboriginal or treaty rights' interests without first consulting first nations.

Government Orders

Although the consultation process consisted of a planning phase, June 2006, a consultation phase, September 2006 to January 2007, and a consensus building phase, February 2007, the process was considered largely to be information sessions rather than serious consultations by first nations who want to protect and preserve their lands for future generations.

A second concern is that most first nations do not have the capacity to develop the local bylaws referred to in Bill C-8. More disturbing, however, is the fact that these local bylaws can only occur under a federally approved verification officer, a throwback to the Indian agent of the 1950s and wholly inconsistent with the inherent right to self-government. One chief said to me that he feels as if he is living through the residential school system again, a system which destroyed his family.

A third concern is that Bill C-8 does not recognize traditional first nations governments and procedures related to matrimonial property rights, such as traditional forms of dispute resolution involving elders.

Domestic violence is another serious issue that must be addressed as part of the search for solutions to matrimonial real property issues on reserves. Family violence in first nations communities has been described as a consequence to colonization, forced assimilation and cultural genocide.

Bill C-8 would force people with matrimonial real property, or MRP, issues to hire lawyers and utilize the courts, which would undermine the cultural integrity of first nations, and increase family and community discord. First nations want to ensure that their children have an opportunity to live in their communities and learn their culture and language.

The bill creates the appearance of action while leaving underlying socio-economic problems such as inadequate housing, substandard education and unemployment unaddressed.

• (1345)

First nations estimated a housing shortfall of 80,000 units on reserves in 2005. The federal government estimated the shortfall between 20,000 to 35,000 units. Based on current funding levels, it could take anywhere from 15 to 60 years to resolve current housing problems. Chronic housing shortages on reserves have, in turn, resulted in overcrowding.

Just this past week, Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation buried five-year-old Tristan Mousseau, who perished in a blaze that destroyed a three-bedroom residence, home to 11 people. Tragically, it was the second time in three months that a child died in a house fire on the reserve of about 3,000 people.

Unfortunately, when first nations couples separate, the lack of affordable alternative housing often further breaks families apart, as one spouse and some, or all, of the children are forced to leave their community to seek available housing.

Not only does Bill C-8 violate the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples but also the Constitution and the comprehensive recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Moreover, it is largely and strongly opposed by first nations.

Ontario Regional Chief Angus Toulouse wrote:

—the federal government reintroduced legislation on Matrimonial Real Property (MRP) on reserve. The text of the new Bill C-8 is exactly the same as the previous Bill C-47, which was condemned by Resolution 08/66 at the All Ontario Special Chiefs Conference on November 18, 2008. First Nations in Ontario have clearly expressed opposition based on the fact that the federal duty to consult and accommodate First Nations has not been met and further, that the Bill does not respect Aboriginal and Treaty rights as confirmed in the Constitution of Canada... the First Nation position is that the Bill should be opposed at introduction.

First nations organizations, including the Assembly of First Nations, Chiefs of Ontario and Nishnawbe Aski Nation, have passed resolutions opposing Bill C-8.

On March 26, NAN Deputy Grand Chief RoseAnne Archibald together with the NAN Women's Council and more than 80 women from 49 communities united in a peaceful demonstration to demand the Government of Canada withdraw Bill C-8. Some of the women carried signs which read:

Residential School, Sixties Scoop, Now Matrimonial Real Property; Accommodat2on, Consultation, We Were Not Accommodated with Regards to Bill C-8; and Listen to Our Grandmothers and Elders.

I wish I had time to identify the over 20 recommendations made by the ministerial representative and the federal response to each regarding Bill C-8. The words “not addressed” would occur repeatedly.

In closing, I would like members to know that prior to my serving this House, I had the honour and privilege of serving on a first nations board. Each time I sat down with elders and band members, I learned so much. I learned to listen and not to talk unless I held the talking stick. I learned to smudge or brush smoke from burning cedar, sage or sweetgrass to my body to cleanse my spirit. I learned that elders are vital to any community and was glad to learn at their knees and partake in ceremonies. I learned that before any meeting, a chief would call upon the grandfathers and ask for help because we do not have all the answers.

It is time that first nations hold the talking stick and that government listens.

• (1350)

Mr. John Duncan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Madam Speaker, the member talked about consultation. There was considerable consultation on the bill, with 103 different meetings and multi-millions of dollars spent. A lot of work was done with the Native Women's Association of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations and with other organizations. Bill C-8 would address a big vacuum in the law, and everyone knows that.

Statements by Members

Is the member aware that in 2008 a submission was made by the Canadian Feminist Alliance to the report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women? It said that despite some disagreement in the aboriginal women's community about how to deal quickly with this bill, this was a straightforward issue and should be dealt with immediately.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Madam Speaker, I think there is consensus in the fact that all first nations women's groups are opposed to the bill. Moreover, the bill does not meet the requirements of the UN declaration, which the government did not sign. The Conservative government was one of only four governments not to sign the declaration, and that number is now down to three.

The bill also does not meet our Constitution.

Mr. Brian Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. member for Etobicoke North one simple question. To her knowledge, is it true that first nations groups are working on the panoply of rights they want for their own communities?

The right of self-determination is very clear in the United Nations declaration for aboriginal peoples. The Indian Act is something entirely different, which puts a fiduciary duty on the Government of Canada. I am speaking of rights with respect to making their own laws, not only with respect to matrimonial property, but with respect to access, with respect to child and family services and with respect to the best interests of the child as we know it.

First nations groups are working on these rights. The Conservative government seems to be in a drive-by legislation mode, whereby it drives a big truck through a community and throws a piece of piecemeal legislation off the back. The Conservatives take this approach with justice issues and aboriginal issues.

Are first nations not offended by this approach because they are working on solutions to their own problems in their own way and in their own time, as they are guaranteed to do by law?

• (1355)

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Madam Speaker, Bill C-8 is inconsistent with first nations right to self-determination, which is recognized in our Constitution. It is contrary to first nations jurisdiction over family law, which was recognized by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

I would like to stress that it is up to first nations to identify gaps in laws and address them as they see fit in their own law-making initiatives.

Mr. John Duncan: Madam Speaker, the Liberal critic put forward a hoist amendment, and that is what we are debating. If the amendment is adopted, that would be tantamount to defeating the bill by postponing its consideration. Consequently, the bill would disappear from the order paper and could not be introduced again, even after the postponement period had elapsed.

How could there be a further consultative period if the bill is gone?

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Madam Speaker, it is up to first nations to identify gaps in laws. This bill would take away from the grassroots action, which is happening now.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Madam Speaker, allow me to point out that this morning we had the opportunity to meet with a first nations community which, for the first time since I was elected, underscored the fact that the negotiations between the government and their nation are being conducted in good faith. You had to see the satisfaction of these people and how pleased they were to accept this agreement. They do not think it is perfect; however, they were consulted and they contributed to the agreement. With this agreement, good faith and collaboration with the government they will achieve autonomy.

I am certain that we are seeing this approach for the first time. Unfortunately, it has already fallen by the wayside. We see this from studying the bill before us this morning. In this bill, the government has gone back to its old habits. It is developing something for the first nations that they do not want. They want to collaborate, to be consulted and to contribute to this agreement.

With Bill C-8, the government is making the same mistakes it made in the past. In January 2004, we debated Bill C-44, the forerunner to Bill C-21. Although it wanted section 67 of the Canadian Human Rights Act to be repealed, the Bloc Québécois declared that it felt that the government had not sufficiently consulted the first nations about the impact of the repeal on the communities.

The Bloc was supported by the Assembly of First Nations and the Native Women's Association of Canada.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): I regret to have to interrupt the hon. member.

He will have the floor for approximately 17 minutes when the debate resumes.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

• (1400)

[*English*]

MARCH FOR LIFE

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Winnipeg South, CPC): Madam Speaker, today an estimated 10,000 Canadians from across the country have gathered on Parliament Hill. These individuals will participate in the Hill's largest annual issue-driven rally. This rally attracts people from all nationalities, ethnicities and political stripes. Despite differences in age, religious beliefs and world views, this group is united by one common belief: that all life has value, including the life of an unborn child.

The March for Life is an annual event that works to increase the understanding and demonstrate widespread support for all life. As chair of the multi-party pro-life caucus, I would like to thank the March for Life organizers and welcome everyone who is travelling to Ottawa for this important event. Keep up the good work.

*Statements by Members***SRI LANKA**

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the Liberal opposition continues to demand action by the Canadian government to address the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka. The escalating violence has resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians.

The Liberal Party is calling for the creation of a humanitarian corridor for the delivery of aid and the safe evacuation of the affected population, as well as fast-tracking new and existing visa applications for those wishing to escape the violence and join their immediate family members in Canada.

Canada must insist that the government of Sri Lanka commit to an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

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[*Translation*]

CITIZEN ADVOCACY

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Madam Speaker, I would like to pay tribute to a citizen advocacy organization that is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. Parrainage civique Basses-Laurentides is part of a Quebec-wide citizen advocacy coalition that has been in existence since 1985. Its main mission is social integration.

In the lower Laurentians region, this organization provides a support program by twinning a volunteer and a person who has been marginalized because he or she is different. The goal is to return them to a normal life and get them more involved socially.

The numerous services provided are aimed at helping the individual develop his full potential, learn new skills and connect with others in the community, thereby demystifying intellectual disability.

My thanks to the staff and volunteers of Parrainage civique Basses-Laurentides for all they do with and for the young people of Terrebonne—Blainville. Happy anniversary.

* * *

[*English*]

GOVERNMENT OF MANITOBA

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Madam Speaker, 2009 marks the 40th anniversary of the election of the first NDP government in the province of Manitoba. The NDP has been the most successful and progressive social democratic government in all of North America.

Manitoba was the first government in North America to introduce public auto insurance and the guaranteed annual income. It was the first government to have a province-wide pharmacare program. It was the first province to eliminate medical premiums. It was the first province to become North America's leading hydroelectric power.

Our party was based on the principle that our society must change from one based on competition to one based on co-operation. In that vein, I would like to recognize and pay tribute to the first NDP Premier of Manitoba, the Hon. Ed Schreyer, followed by the Hon. Howard Pawley. We now are pleased to announce the third majority victory for the current Premier of Manitoba, the Hon. Gary Doer,

who is leading the province with the lowest unemployment rate in the country and zero small business tax. Hydro dams are now being built with full ownership by aboriginal—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Brant.

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BRANTFORD GOLDEN EAGLES

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would ask members of Parliament to join me in congratulating the Brantford Golden Eagles.

Twelve days ago, this hard-working hockey team of high-flying Eagles swooped to victory over the Stoney Creek Warriors, eliminating the team 4-1 in games, capturing the Sutherland Cup as Ontario Junior B Champions.

Hanging in the dressing room at the Brantford Civic Centre are these words: “The will to win is worthless if you do not have the will to prepare”, and prepare they did. These young men played their hearts out and have brought pride to our community. The players, coaches, owners and support staff did it: Well done.

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● (1405)

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Liberals took it upon themselves today to do what the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans refuses to do herself.

Today in Ottawa, at the request of this side of the House, we met with industry leaders and heads of organizations from Atlantic Canadian fishing industry interests. Last week, the FFAW, the Maritime Fishermen's Union, the PEIFA, and Regroupement des pêcheurs professionnels du sud de la Gaspésie, among others, called for an emergency meeting with the federal fisheries minister to discuss the crisis in the fishing industry, in particular the lobster industry.

So far, the minister has refused. She has refused to show leadership. She has refused to do her job. She has refused to stand up for this \$1 billion industry. Lobster prices are at all-time lows, markets are marginalized and thousands of families are without income and facing bleak prospects in the future.

Will the minister meet with those fishing organizations and will she do it now?

The Speaker: I would remind the hon. member for Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte of my statements about personal attacks in Standing Order 31 statements and I would urge him to have a look at that before he makes his next statement.

The hon. member for Burlington.

*Statements by Members***BURLINGTON CITIZEN OF THE YEAR**

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Burlington's Civic Recognition Awards will take place this evening. The awards bring recognition to Burlington residents who, through devoted and energetic volunteer service, help make Burlington a great community.

I would like to extend congratulations to Mina Wahidi, who is the recipient of Burlington's most prestigious award, Citizen of the Year. Mrs. Wahidi is being recognized for her determination in making a difference in our community.

As a true champion of the needy, she helped start an agency, the Compassion Society. The Compassion Society actually had very humble beginnings. It started in 2001 when Mina offered clothing from her basement to those in need. She had one rack of clothing and one volunteer. Although the society has grown, one thing has not changed and that is Mina and her dream of helping others in need.

I congratulate Mina Wahidi, Burlington's Citizen of the Year.

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[Translation]

TAX HAVENS

Mr. Robert Carrier (Alfred-Pellan, BQ): Mr. Speaker, while a number of states are experiencing chronic deficits, the world's richest citizens are siphoning off their profits to places where they can stash them away and shelter them from taxes. This increases the tax burden on the middle class and low wage earners. There are more than 72 places where this tax evasion is possible: the Caribbean, Jersey, Ghana, to name but a few. As a result states are being deprived of large amounts of revenue which could have been invested to improve the well-being of their population.

While \$11,000 billion is safely tucked away in these tax havens, the UN is calling for \$50 billion over five years to eradicate world poverty. That amount is the equivalent of a scant 0.5% of those hidden billions. This special treatment of the most fortunate must stop. It is high time that this government followed the example of the Obama administration and passed legislation to effectively deal with the use of tax havens.

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[English]

PAKISTAN

Mr. Tim Uppal (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the heavy clashes in northwestern Pakistan between security forces and Taliban militants have forced up to 360,000 people to flee their homes. A further one million people could be displaced in the coming months as the military offensive continues.

Minorities, including Christians, Sikhs and Hindus, have been discriminated against and persecuted by the Taliban. Recently, a Sikh community in the Swat Valley had to flee and about 2,000 have taken refuge in a Sikh temple, Gurdwara Panja Sahib, in Hasan Abdal. Sikhs in the nearby Orakzai province have also fled after Taliban militants demanded they pay a poll tax imposed on all non-Muslims. Many of their houses have been destroyed by the Taliban in response to the non-payment of the protection money tax.

While Canada is closely monitoring the situation and we remain concerned about all civilians in the conflict affected areas, we call upon the government of Pakistan to ensure the security and safety of all its citizens, including religious minorities.

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VIMALA SADASHIV DHAVALE

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured today to pay tribute to Mrs. Vimala Sadashiv Dhavale, a respected member of my community of Ottawa South, who passed away on January 14, 2009.

Mrs. Dhavale was born in Wardha in the Maharashtra state in India on October 10, 1920. Vimala was a good student who excelled in academic life. Inspired by this love of learning, she attained a post-secondary degree in education, and became a teacher. For over two decades in India she taught senior high school students English, history and math.

During her tenure as a teacher, Mrs. Dhavale also developed a devotion to the daily practice of therapeutic yoga after finding it had cured her of chronic asthma. She committed herself to a lifelong advocacy of the benefits of yoga, becoming a yoga teacher, giving seminars and authoring several books on the practice.

After retiring from teaching, she immigrated to Canada in 1978, obtained her nursing degree from Algonquin College and worked at Glebe Centre. There she brought her love of yoga to Ottawa's seniors community, offering classes across the city. Her dedication to seniors continued over decades. Mrs. Dhavale continued her good works until just weeks before her passing.

On behalf of the House of Commons, I offer our condolences to her sons, Vijay, Vishwas and Vivek Dhavale. Through her devotion to her family, her students, her patients and her community, she made them exceptionally proud.

* * *

● (1410)

PARLIAMENTARIAN OF THE YEAR

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday we gathered for *Maclean's* annual Parliamentarians of the Year awards.

Winners and runners-up were drawn from all parties and I congratulate all of them. However, the most coveted prize, Parliamentarian of the Year, was awarded to a Conservative, the member for Calgary Southeast, our own Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism.

Since being elected in 1997, the minister has devoted his energies and his passion to advancing Canada's role as a champion of human dignity, human rights, equality of opportunity and the rule of law. He has also promoted Parliament as a forum for a clash of values and ideas about how the country should be governed. He has also shown throughout his career that no matter what their party allegiances, parliamentarians can disagree without being disagreeable.

The minister is well known for his work ethic, his love of debate and of politics for its own sake, his sense of humour, his laugh that can be heard throughout this chamber, as well as his belief that friendships can and must cross party lines.

I congratulate the minister on this achievement.

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CREATE YOUR CANADA

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my hon. colleague from Windsor on winning the Most Knowledgeable MP in the House award for the second year running, which is very nice.

Last night three New Democrat bills were passed and sent to committee, two of which would help protect consumers and one which would stop the unfair clawbacks on the pensions of our military and police officers.

On June 1 I will be hosting four young Canadians from the northwest of British Columbia who are the first winners of my contest called, “Create Your Canada”.

New Democrats believe that no one has a lock on the solutions that we need for the future and that we must show in action our commitment to our youth.

I ask the Minister of Transport and the Minister of Natural Resources to meet with these young people and listen to their hopes for future generations.

New Democrats support the aspirations of our youth. Let us hope the government is willing to do the same.

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[Translation]

CITY OF LÉVIS

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during this time of economic uncertainty, we have to be able to count on solid, serious partners who will make infrastructure investments with us, partners like Quebec municipalities.

Today, I would like to talk about our exceptional partnership with the City of Lévis, whose representatives are here in the House. They helped build the Centre de congrès et d'expositions de Lévis, and they supported the reopening of the Davie shipyard and the water treatment plant. With partners like the City of Lévis and its whole team, including the mayor, Quebec and Canada will achieve even more.

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ABORTION RIGHTS

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Mr. Speaker, May 14, 2009, marks an important victory in the fight for women's rights. It is the 40th anniversary of the amendment of section 251 of the Criminal Code, which made abortion a crime.

On May 14, 1969, women won the right, the freedom, the choice to have an abortion. Forty years later, despite these amendments to the Criminal Code, women must still fight for their rights. Since that

Statements by Members

historic day, some right-wing, anti-choice groups and some members of Parliament have tried repeatedly to take that right away.

Today, we are telling them, loud and clear, that a woman's uterus belongs neither to the church, nor to members of Parliament, nor to their sexual partners. This often difficult choice is theirs, and theirs alone, to make. With them and for them, we will take a stand and continue to oppose any bill that could threaten this most basic of women's rights.

* * *

●(1415)

[English]

IMMIGRATION

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Mississauga—Brampton South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, 1.5 million Canadians are unemployed, 130,000 Canadians have declared bankruptcy within the last 12 months, and 342,000 Canadians have lost their jobs since October. The only response from the Conservative Prime Minister is personal attack ads.

The Prime Minister suggests in these ads that anyone who has spent a portion of their life outside Canada is less committed to this country. This shows his ignorance of what Canada represents.

Canada is a nation of immigrants. Within the next decade all of our net growth will come from immigration.

Is the Prime Minister saying that these new Canadians who have spent part of their lives outside Canada do not really love this country or are less Canadian than others?

These personal attack ads are not just an attack on the Leader of the Opposition but are an attack on all Canadians. The Conservatives should be ashamed of what they have done.

* * *

TAXATION

Mr. Greg Rickford (Kenora, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is day 30 since the Liberal leader said, “We will have to raise taxes”, 30 days in which he has not denied making the statement, 30 days with no retraction of the statement and, most important, 30 days without an explanation of which taxes he would raise, by how much he would raise them and who would have to pay.

This is the same Liberal leader who describes himself as a “tax and spend Pearsonian-Trudeau Liberal”. He fathered the Liberal carbon tax. He said, “We have also got to have popular, practical, believable policies that may involve some form of carbon tax”. He is also considering a hike in the GST, saying, “I am not going to take a GST hike off the table”. These are not my words, but they do concern me.

After a month of silence, can the Liberal leader set the record straight once and for all and tell the House which taxes he would raise, by how much he would raise them and who would have to pay?

*Oral Questions***ORAL QUESTIONS***[English]***EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE**

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a third of a million Canadians have lost their jobs under the Conservative government.

Tens of thousands cannot get the employment insurance they paid for, because Conservatives insist on eligibility rules designed for the beginning of a boom. But the boom has gone bust. The C.D. Howe Institute, the Conference Board, and the TD Bank are not socialist organizations, and they all say the Conservatives are wrong on EI.

Why will the Prime Minister not help all the jobless workers who are suffering through his recession, regardless of where they live?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as members will have heard from our social development minister as well, we have a generous system of EI in this country. It has been in place for a while. We actually made it better under budget 2009 by extending work sharing and by extending the program itself by five weeks. It is driven by market demands. It is there for times of economic difficulty, and 80% of those who pay in get money out of the system.

We will not be in favour of a system that drives higher payroll taxes, which will not be to the benefit of workers and not to the benefit of businesses.

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let us be clear. The previous Liberal government slashed EI premiums 12 consecutive times. That is a cut of more than 40%, and now premiums are frozen at that lower Liberal level.

EI rates will only go up if these Conservatives put them up. So do not blame the Liberals and do not blame the innocent victims who are trashed by a Conservative recession.

The Prime Minister thinks EI benefits are too generous. The minister says they are too lucrative. Will they not just admit the only thing stopping them from fixing EI is their own archaic reform party ideology?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I see the member for Kings—Hants applauding his House leader there.

Here is what the hon. member for Kings—Hants said at a more sensible time in his life. He said, “Payroll taxes, especially EI taxes, are a tax on jobs”.

That is what he said then. He was right then. We are right now. We will not forsake the workers. We will not forsake Canadian businesses. We believe in lower payroll taxes.

We believe in lower taxes, whereas his leader said, one month ago today, “We will have to raise taxes”.

That is not good enough.

● (1420)

*[Translation]***FISHERIES AND OCEANS**

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the economic crisis is also hitting lobster fishers. Lobster prices have collapsed. Fishers in Quebec and Atlantic Canada are literally on the brink of bankruptcy. The Minister of Fisheries and Oceans does not seem too worried about this. She does not even have time to meet with representatives of the fishers. They are trying to reach her, but “There is no service at the number you have dialed.”

What will the Conservatives do to help the people of Gaspé, the Magdalen Islands and Atlantic Canada who make a living from the lobster fishery? Will the government buy back their licences, or will it let them go hungry?

[English]

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is true that the lobster industry is facing some serious challenges. It is in crisis, like many industries are.

This is not a time to grandstand; this is a time to work together. That is what we have done. Our minister has had numerous conversations with her provincial counterparts. All are engaged in this throughout the Atlantic region. She is having a meeting tomorrow with industry and provincial leaders in Moncton, and we expect some good solutions to come out of that meeting.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, will the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans indicate to the House that the Government of Canada will establish a rationalization program for the fisheries in Eastern Canada with appropriate federal funding?

Also, the minister and the government received an EI proposal from the fishing industry that would allow people in eastern Canada involved in the fishing industry to draw EI this winter. Will the minister stand in her place today and confirm that these changes are forthcoming?

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this question is a little premature. As I just mentioned, she has a meeting tomorrow with all her provincial counterparts and all the main industry leaders from Prince Edward Island, his province, and the other provinces as well.

We will see what comes out of that meeting. We expect some solutions to come.

* * *

LOBSTER INDUSTRY

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, day after day, as industry after Canadian industry hit the wall and Canadian workers hit the streets, all we have seen from the Minister of Human Resources is standing regurgitating talking points. She is like the ShamWow salesman and Canadians are not buying it.

Oral Questions

What we see in Atlantic Canada is a pending crisis in the Atlantic lobster fishery. What is the minister willing to do to help these people and spare us the sales pitch?

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, obviously the member and some of his colleagues are missing the things that we already have done. In fact, if he read our economic action plan, he would see that we have already improved access to credit. We have already put in place a fund that will help with marketing. There are some conditions in the industry right now, such as a reduced demand, that have pushed prices down. This government has no control over those things. We are working on the things we can control.

* * *

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the government's answers, and especially the Prime Minister's, are full of lies. Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that an employment insurance eligibility threshold of 360 hours would give unemployed workers 52 weeks of employment insurance benefits. That is not true.

It is not true under the current system. It is not true under the bills the Bloc has introduced. It is not true under any mechanisms.

Can the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development explain how a 360-hour eligibility threshold would automatically give—

The Speaker: Order, please. I regret to have to interrupt the hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie, but he used unparliamentary language, and I hope he will withdraw what he said the next time he asks a question.

The hon. Minister of National Revenue has the floor to reply.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of National Revenue and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, can the leader of the Bloc Québécois answer my questions?

When our government wanted to help people who are losing their jobs by giving them an additional five weeks of benefits, at a time when it is harder to find a job quickly because of the recession, why did the leader of the Bloc Québécois vote against that measure?

In addition, when we wanted to give people a \$1,350 credit for home renovations in order to stimulate the economy and create work for the construction industry, why did he vote against that measure?

• (1425)

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I used the same language the Minister of Public Works and Government Services used yesterday. If he can use it, I can use it.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Gilles Duceppe: I ask the minister to stand up and explain the falsehood we heard yesterday.

How would 360 hours equal 52 weeks of benefits? That is not true.

The people who elected us expect us to tell the truth. I ask the question again. If the government has even a modicum of honesty, let her stand up and correct her answer.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. Minister of National Revenue.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of National Revenue and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the employment insurance system is based on the unemployment rate in the regions of Quebec and Canada. The higher the unemployment rate, the fewer hours or weeks Canadians need to work to qualify for employment insurance. That is our model.

For example, in Gaspé, the unemployment rate often fluctuates around 20%, whereas in Quebec City, it is only 4%. Everyone understands that it is easier to find a job in Quebec City than in Gaspé. That is the basic principle behind our employment insurance system.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, under the Quebec bill, an eligibility threshold of 360 hours and a 16% unemployment rate would entitle people to a maximum of 36 weeks. That is far from the 52 weeks referred to by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development.

Will the minister acknowledge her mistake and apologize to the unemployed?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of National Revenue and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, there have been a number of employment insurance reforms over the years in this country. The program we have at present takes regional unemployment rates into account. The program is adapted so that the number of weeks worked to be eligible for benefits is lower in areas where it is harder to find a job.

The drawback to the system proposed by the Liberal party is that it would destabilize the foundations of our employment-based economy. It would even have another major drawback: encouraging people to work under the table rather than stimulate the economy of Canada.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, if the minister were the least bit honest, she would acknowledge her error and apologize to the unemployed.

Instead of ranting on about the opposition proposals for improving the system, the minister ought to acknowledge that the present system does not meet the needs of workers who lose their jobs.

Will she at last carry out a thorough reform of this program by setting eligibility at 360 hours, abolishing the waiting period, and improving benefits, as the Bloc Québécois is proposing?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of National Revenue and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, while our economy is in difficulty, it is important to act on a number of fronts simultaneously. The first is to try to stimulate the economy. To that end, \$12 billion has been earmarked to promote construction, the development of infrastructure just about everywhere in the country, and repairs to infrastructure that is, shall we say, in bad shape.

Oral Questions

Then we are making money available to people for home renovations. We are also supporting workers. They proposed eliminating the two week waiting period, but we have given five more weeks of benefits to the unemployed, which is to their advantage. It means—

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Toronto—Danforth.

* * *

[*English*]

BURMA

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Nobel Prize winner, democracy activist and Canadian citizen Aung San Suu Kyi is facing five years in prison after an American swam to her house, violating her house arrest conditions. She should not be under house arrest at all, let alone in jail.

Could the government tell us what representations, if any, it has made to the Burmese junta to insist upon her immediate release?

• (1430)

[*Translation*]

Can the government tell us, here in this House, now, what steps have been taken to defend the rights of Aung San Suu Kyi?

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member asked a relevant question.

Our government is alarmed by the new charges laid against Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. We have called for her immediate release, along with all political prisoners in Burma.

We strongly urge the Burmese authorities to provide appropriate medical care for Aung San Suu Kyi and for all inmates held unjustly in Burma's prisons.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Prime Minister clearly misled Canadians on EI. Worse than that, he threatened an election on the backs of the unemployed.

The truth is this: One third of men and 40% of women do not have permanent full-time jobs. Most of them fall through the cracks of the EI system. Government research shows that 66% of part-timers and the majority of young workers who pay premiums do not qualify to get the benefits after a layoff, because they have not worked enough hours.

Instead of bullying, threatening and misleading, why will—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Industry.

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, here is the reality: As a result of our economic action plan, we added an extra five weeks to EI, we froze premium rates, and we provided extra work-sharing. Another 100,000 Canadians are protected as a result of our efforts, which that member's party voted against.

We see what is happening here. The coalition is alive and well. The coalition is working together on this issue. They want extra

payroll taxes for Canadian businesses and workers. That is their issue. We will not allow that to happen.

* * *

[*Translation*]

PENSION PLANS

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, after accepting early retirement incentives, AbitibiBowater pensioners are being left with nothing.

These people followed the rules and contributed to the system, but are losing their pension.

How can a company like AbitibiBowater be allowed to shirk its responsibilities towards its pensioners, when the former executive chairman, John Weaver, was given a severance package of \$17.5 million?

Why does the government still refuse to protect retirees, but continue to help—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Industry.

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the reality is that Canada has a very generous employment insurance system. We improved that system through Canada's economic action plan and budget 2009. Here on this side of the House, we are saying that coalitions like the one formed in December must be stopped. Such a coalition cannot be allowed because it is not in the best interest of workers or businesses.

[*English*]

We will not allow that coalition. They do not represent the people of Canada. This is merely another coalition.

* * *

[*Translation*]

SRI LANKA

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the government concerning the worsening humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka.

Yesterday, reports indicated that a hospital had been bombed causing the death of 50 people. Today, we learned that the hospital may have been abandoned, leaving 400 injured people without care.

I would like to ask the government a very simple question. What will it do to ensure that this humanitarian crisis does not become a total disaster?

[*English*]

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think everyone in the House and across Canada are seriously concerned about the civilian victims in Sri Lanka and that is why our government has called for a ceasefire. We support the UN and other countries' call for a ceasefire and unhindered access for humanitarian workers.

We have put forward \$7.5 million in aid and we are willing to meet with the Tamil Canadian community.

Oral Questions

•(1435)

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is now clear that the calls from the Security Council have been ignored by the government of Sri Lanka. The foreign minister today is quoted as saying that they simply will not listen to those requests for a ceasefire.

We have at least, according to the UN estimates, 50,000 people who are trapped in a space of roughly two square miles. They cannot get out because the government and the Tamil Tigers will not let them get out.

What will the government now do when faced with this situation? It is not enough to give speeches. The government needs to tell us what action it will take.

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member knows, the entire world is very concerned, which is why we are working with other countries and the United Nations. We will continue to work with those countries, with the Security Council and the other United Nations agencies.

Initially, we are trying to get the immediate needed aid there and we will continue to have dialogue. If the United Nations comes forward with any further action, we will proceed.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in the House, the government dodges questions by saying that the Abdelrazik case is before the courts, but in the courts, the government argues that the court does not have jurisdiction. Meanwhile, Mr. Abdelrazik is stranded in Sudan.

How long will the government repeat these irrelevant and misleading lines instead of protecting his rights and bringing Mr. Abdelrazik home to Canada?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Mr. Abdelrazik's case is a very complex matter that began under the watch of the previous Liberal government, the government under which the hon. member was the minister of justice. The reason the Liberals could not do anything was because Mr. Abdelrazik was on the al-Qaeda Taliban no-fly list.

I do not know why the hon. member promotes this case as Mr. Abdelrazik is still on that list.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if the present government can treat Mr. Abdelrazik as it does, it can happen to any Canadian.

Parliament deserves an answer. Does the government have a policy of ignoring the rights of any Canadian simply because there may be a terrorist allegation, when our own security services say that it is unfounded and the charter mandates him coming back to Canada now?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the UN 1267 al-Qaeda and Taliban sanctions committee was established for the purpose of overseeing the implementation of sanctions imposed on people who are associated with terrorists, such as Osama bin Laden.

Mr. Abdelrazik is on this list and he was on this list when the hon. member was the minister of justice and he could not do anything at that time. Mr. Abdelrazik is still on that same list.

As far as we are concerned, we are meeting our international obligations.

* * *

[Translation]

FORESTRY INDUSTRY

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, here is what a government representative had to say to the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology:

—I can now confirm that, in our opinion, the new program known as the operating line of credit guarantee does not contravene the obligations included in international trade agreements.

Do the Conservative members agree with this statement?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is important to state that all government measures respect our agreements such as that with the World Trade Organization. Naturally, if there are challenges or problems, we must analyze the situation and respond.

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): This is the opinion of Ms. Métivier, Executive Vice President of BDC, who confirmed in writing that these guarantees are legal under international agreements.

What is the Conservative government waiting for to provide forestry companies with loans and loan guarantees equivalent to those provided to the Ontario automotive sector?

•(1440)

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of National Revenue and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our softwood lumber agreement spells out certain obligations. We cannot give Canadian companies an advantage over American companies. If we provide any advantage, we will be going against the softwood lumber agreement and customs tariffs may be imposed. That is the reality. Export Development Canada can provide support but not an advantage.

* * *

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in response to a question I asked about the closure of the Bagotville base and possible disbanding of 439 Squadron, the Prime Minister said, “We have no intention of making such a decision”. However, an intention is not a firm commitment and we have the right to know the truth.

I am asking a clear question that demands a clear response this time: Will the government reject the hypothesis of disbanding Bagotville's 439 Squadron, yes or no?

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of National Defence receives advice, briefing notes and decks all the time, as does every other minister, but it is advice only. It is the government that makes decisions, not the bureaucracy. No decisions have been made with respect to the location of existing assets or aircraft required in the future.

[Translation]

No decisions have been made concerning the location of existing operational training units or future aircraft procurements.

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, a simple yes or no should be easy. Once again, as has been the case all week, we have not received any clear answers that would lead us to believe that Bagotville will be protected. The same ambiguity abounds and the government refuses to make a firm commitment.

Is this not proof that the Conservatives are once again about to break one of their election promises, and that the disbanding of Bagotville's 439 Squadron is no longer a hypothesis, but is becoming a reality?

[English]

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the only thing that member is losing is his sense of reality.

The Minister of National Defence gets advice all the time, as does every other minister, but it is the government that will make the decisions. When we make a decision, it will be in the best interests of the Canadian Forces, in the best interests of the people the Canadian Forces serves, in the best interests of the people of Canada and in the best interests of, first and foremost, the people who look after us. We need to look after them. We are not like the group across the way that plunged the Canadian Forces into a decade of darkness and sucked the lifeblood out of them for 10 years.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government does not seem to want to let the human resources minister stand and answer any questions today. Perhaps that is because yesterday the Minister of Human Resources failed to tell the truth when she claimed that creating a universal 360-hour eligibility standard for EI would "mean that a Canadian could work for 45 days and collect EI for a year". That is completely false.

Will the minister admit to misleading the House and, for once, tell the truth? Do unemployed Canadians not deserve at least that?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal proposal is to have Canadians work for 360 hours to collect EI benefits, which works out to 45 days. However, what would go along with that would need be a dramatic increase in payroll taxes, a payroll tax increase that would kill jobs and small businesses.

We are trying to protect jobs and help Canadian workers keep their jobs, which is why we brought in work-sharing and why we

froze EI premium rates. The Liberals want to tax and spend people out of their jobs, not us.

[Translation]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, to hear the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, one might conclude that telling the truth is not part of her DNA. She has just misled the House and the Canadian public once again.

First of all, it was not her government that froze taxes and employment insurance contributions; it was the Liberal government. That is my first point.

Second, establishing a national standard of 360 hours does not entitle an individual to a year of benefits. She is misleading the House once again.

● (1445)

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, 360 hours at eight hours a day works out to 45 days. This is not our proposal. It is the proposal of the Liberals, the Bloc and the NDP.

Our proposal is to keep people in their jobs, which is why we expanded the work-sharing program. This protects 100,000 people's jobs right now. We froze EI premium rates in our economic action plan so we could preserve even more jobs, keep Canadians working and give them the supports they need.

We are supporting Canadian businesses and workers.

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INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDS

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the numbers on personal bankruptcies and unemployment have soared in the past but the government has barely spent any of the stimulus dollars. Out of \$56 million for Surrey, barely \$6 million went out the door. Shovels in the ground have remained shovels in the shed.

How many more bankruptcies and job losses will it take before the government gets any of the real infrastructure projects off the ground?

Hon. Rob Merrifield (Minister of State (Transport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is absolutely not true. We are working closely with our counterparts, the municipalities and the provinces, to get those shovels in the ground.

I can give an example of a province that is really working. The provincial Government of British Columbia has received hundreds of millions of dollars for 140 projects. People are wearing hard hats and the shovels are in the ground today. That is what is going on and it is well on its way to receiving a lot more.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

Mrs. Lise Zarac (LaSalle—Émard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, at this very moment, members of the Union des municipalités du Québec are meeting in Gatineau. Their message is clear: the Conservatives have to move something other than their lips to get shovels in the ground.

Blaming the Government of Quebec for delays, as the Minister of National Revenue did, creates exactly zero jobs. To build infrastructure, we need money to pay workers. Where is that money?

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and Minister for La Francophonie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will answer my colleague's question by saying that we announced \$12 billion in infrastructure spending in our action plan in January. Since then, we have announced, among other things, a plan to refurbish the Lévis water treatment plant, which is in my colleague's riding.

* * *

[English]

CUBA

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I read yesterday that the leader of the Liberal Party has called for the opening of ties with Cuba. He is quoted in the *South Asian Focus* newspaper saying, "Canada needs to have ties with Cuba - at present Canada plays no role there at all".

Could the Minister of International Trade tell us what kind of ties Canada has with Cuba?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am surprised at the lack of foreign policy knowledge by the leader of the Liberal Party. Last year alone—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The Minister of International Trade has the floor. We need to have some order so the House can hear the response.

The hon. Minister of International Trade.

Hon. Stockwell Day: Mr. Speaker, in a recent meeting that I had with my counterpart from Cuba, we reflected on the fact that last year Canadians exported almost three-quarters of a billion dollars worth of goods to Cuba. Two-way trade was \$1.6 billion, that is a 36% increase over 2007. Last year, 820,000 Canadians visited Cuba. It is our fifth most popular destination. We have had diplomatic relations with Cuba since 1945. That is 64 years.

Maybe because he lived the majority or a good part of those years in the United States, he has the policies confused.

* * *

●(1450)

FORESTRY INDUSTRY

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government's neglect of the forestry sector has hurt communities, workers, pensioners and now small companies. Small companies like T&M Logging in Atikokan are owed, in some cases,

hundreds of thousands of dollars by large bankrupt corporations like AbitibiBowater and Buchanan Forest Products. The proposed business credit availability program will be inaccessible to these smaller companies because they need overdraft limits of at least \$400,000 to even apply.

Where is the small in small business? Bankruptcy laws protect large forestry companies, but what is the government doing to protect small businesses?

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member knows full well that we have reacted to the forestry sector pressures. I can go through a whole list of initiatives that this government has taken, including the access to the \$5 billion in new credit that he seems to disparage. We put \$170 million to support market diversification, innovation initiatives, which will certainly improve the forestry sector in the future. We have extended the accelerated capital cost allowance. We have eliminated tariffs on machinery. We put \$1 billion into a community adjustment fund.

We are working to get the job done for Canadian forestry communities.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what is left of the Canadian pulp and paper industry is holding on for dear life: the botched softwood lumber deal, the pine beetle infestation, raw log exports and the crash in the U.S. housing market. Now, on June 1, the U.S. will renew its billion dollar black liquor subsidy to its pulp and paper mills, putting Canadian mills at a massive competitive disadvantage.

Canadian pulp and paper companies need a level playing field. Does the government plan to fight this U.S. subsidy, match it, or will it admit it has no plan at all for Canadian forestry products?

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we understand that this subsidy has had an adverse effect on our forestry communities and our forestry pulp industry, and we are moving ahead to deal with that. The minister has talked to Steven Chu in the United States about this issue.

However, everything that we have done, the NDP has opposed. It opposed the EI extensions. It has opposed the community adjustment fund. It has opposed the market development. It has opposed the new technology and transition. Everything that it stands for is opposed to progress in the forestry sector.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

BORDER SERVICE AGENCY

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): Mr. Speaker, from the very start, the Border Service Agency has shown bad faith as far as the use of French before the IRB is concerned. Last February, it even preferred to postpone a hearing in Montreal for two months rather than get its evidence translated into French. Last weekend, people demonstrated in front of the IRB in protest of the agency's refusal to apply the law.

Does the minister find it normal, in the year 2009 and in Montreal, for people to have to hold a protest to gain respect for French by a federal agency and by the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do find it normal for Canadians to express their views. As for myself, I express my point of view and, like this government, I support the Official Languages Act. It is even a constitutional obligation.

However, the IRB is a quasi-judicial independent board and as such decides on its own processes and procedures as far as language is concerned. The decision is therefore up to the IRB and not the government.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the agency is so determined in its refusal that it prefers not to present evidence, rather than have it translated into French.

If the agency refuses to let francophone employees use the French version of evidence intended for a francophone board member, is this not quite simply because of its disdain for the French language?

[English]

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, CBSA takes its obligations under the Official Languages Act very seriously. It is committed to ensuring the services are offered in both official languages. Under the rules of the Immigration and Refugee Board, all documents presented as evidence are required to be translated in the official language of the proceedings.

* * *

●(1455)

AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

Mr. Francis Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the industry minister finally read the auto subcommittee report, filed a month and a half ago, and has recommended methods to stimulate car sales, including a new auto scrappage program. Unfortunately his delay and dithering on the file is yet again causing harm to the auto industry.

Does the minister not realize that his musings about a scrappage program will stop auto purchases by people who will now wait to see if they can get more money for their old cars? When will the scrappage program be introduced?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the ex-auto critic's question is ridiculous. This is a government that has an auto innovation fund, which is rolling out. This is a government that is back-stopping the warranties, that is ensuring

there is accounts receivable insurance in place and that there is access to credit in place.

We have been working with the parts manufacturers and suppliers. We have been working with the industry. That is our record.

The answer of members on the other side of the House is more payroll taxes and more taxes across the board. We will not have anything to do with that.

Mr. Francis Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Forgive me, Mr. Speaker, if I am skeptical, but the government is showing again that it says one thing and does nothing.

Does the minister not realize his scrappage program does the exact opposite of what he intends? Instead of buying cars, people are now holding tight to their old ones, with the possibility that maybe some day they will get more money for them.

This is yet another ill-deployed program of the Conservative government. Car shoppers and car dealers across Canada what to know this. When will Canada have a new scrappage program?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the United States does not have a scrappage program, but we are looking very closely at the situation.

The fact is when it comes to the members on the other side of the House, here is what their leader says. In British Columbia he says that he does not want to help the auto sector, yet in the House the ex-auto critic stands every week and says that they want to be helpful to the auto sector.

That is how that side of the House deals with the important problems of industry in our country. That is not good enough for the people of Canada.

* * *

[Translation]

VALE INCO

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Industry is not doing his job.

On March 3, Vale Inco laid off 350 workers. On March 4, the minister said he would examine the agreement between the government and the Brazilian company. On April 16, Vale Inco announced it was shutting down its Sudbury operations. On April 19, the minister spoke of demanding a reckoning from Vale Inco. Last week, the company announced it was transferring jobs to Brazil.

When will the minister defend the rights of the workers of northern Ontario?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have asked Vale Inco for answers and explanations on this. We will examine all possible options that come under our legislation.

[English]

However, the hon. member might want to check his facts. If he would, he would understand that any additional announcements made by that company are after the period of Investment Canada obligations.

*Oral Questions***STATUS OF WOMEN**

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Statistics Canada released a shocking that showed 101,000 women and children fled into shelters last year.

The current economic crisis has caused a sharp increase in people seeking shelter. Last month alone, women's shelters in London, Ontario had a 79% increase in calls over the last year. In Calgary a women's emergency shelter help line had a 300% increase in calls.

Will the government help these overburdened shelters and commit to long-term funding to ensure women never have to choose between abuse and a place to live?

Hon. Helena Guergis (Minister of State (Status of Women), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member is aware that I am in the process of developing an action plan for women and one of the pillars is in fact focused on ending violence against women.

I look forward to continuing to receive her valuable information and input in this. This is an issue that is extremely important to our government. We understand that when all of us experience violence, it is a very difficult situation and one that we must address collectively.

I am confident in saying that I do not believe there is one member in the House who would not want to see an end to the violence.

* * *

INTERNATIONAL AID

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the situation in Pakistan has worsened. According to reports, up to 360,000 people have fled the fighting, with more expected in the coming weeks. This adds up to an estimated 550,000 people who have already been internally displaced since August of 2008.

Canadians are deeply concerned about the safety and well-being of those internally displaced persons. Could the Minister of International Cooperation let the House know if the Canadian government will be providing any support for these victims?

• (1500)

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government shares the concerns of Canadians with the plight of those forced to leave their homes in the Swat region of Pakistan, and the government is acting. I am announcing \$5 million to provide food, proper health care and temporary shelters. The Red Cross and the World Food Programme are on the ground, working with those in need.

The men and women, children and seniors who need our help will be supported by Canada.

* * *

FORESTRY INDUSTRY

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada continues to hemorrhage forestry jobs. Now black liquor tax credits in the United States will subsidize American mills to the tune of \$6 billion, threatening to wipe out the few pulp mills that we have left in Canada, further adding to the Conservative

recession. The government keeps telling us that it is standing up to the U.S., and yet its efforts have been futile.

When can Canadians expect the Prime Minister to finally do the right thing and demand that the U.S. cancel these harmful tax credits? We need actions.

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can tell the member opposite that we are determined to minimize the adverse impact of this measure on our domestic forest sector. To do that, the minister has been in contact with the forestry industry. We are considering all options. Utilizing this green tax credit to subsidize U.S. pulp mills is clearly unacceptable, and she has been in contact with the Obama administration to correct this issue.

* * *

[Translation]

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, first it was the Mont-Mégantic observatory, and now it is the University of Sherbrooke nanotechnology laboratory that has to settle for a paltry \$30,000 for one year, having been refused funding of \$500,000 over five years.

The Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada justifies these cuts with the argument that they are changing their focus from regional to international. Yet the Sherbrooke laboratory is the top Franco-Quebec international laboratory in the field of nanotechnology.

How can the Minister of State (Science and Technology) justify such a reduction?

[English]

Hon. Gary Goodyear (Minister of State (Science and Technology), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the nanotechnology lab did in fact apply for new funding and was awarded \$88,700. I want to also mention, though, with respect to the University of Sherbrooke, this Conservative government put forward \$33 million for research at the university.

What is very disappointing and, frankly, dishonest is when the Bloc stands in the House and makes these accusations, yet it voted against any funding for research at the University of Sherbrooke. Bloc members vote against nanotechnology funding. They vote against the people in Quebec.

[Translation]

The Speaker: A few points of order have been raised, but before we proceed, seeing as it is Thursday, the hon. member for Wascana would like to ask another question.

*Points of Order**[English]***BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE**

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, with respect to the business of the House, next week members will be in their constituencies. I wonder if the government House leader could indicate what he intends to call to finish the business this week before we adjourn on Friday, and then his business plan for at least the first week we come back, which would be the last week of May.

I would point out that there remains one day to be designated as an occasion when committee of the whole will consider the estimates of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. I wonder if the minister is in a position now to designate which of the remaining days of May will be the day we consider the estimates in committee of the whole.

Hon. Jay Hill (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, one thing that will not be on the agenda is what the Liberal leader is always asking for and that is tax increases. That certainly will not be on the government's agenda.

Today we are going to continue debate on Bill C-8, the matrimonial real property legislation. Earlier today the Liberal Party moved a six months hoist motion with respect to Bill C-8. The term "six months hoist" is a bit of a misnomer. In modern terms, the adoption of a six months hoist motion would essentially kill the bill. I am surprised at the Liberal Party. The Liberals are always saying they advocate for women's rights. This legislation is about aboriginal women's and children's rights on reserve, and yet they are trying to kill the bill.

Following Bill C-8, we will call Bill C-20, the nuclear liability legislation, and Bill C-30, the Senate ethics legislation. All of these bills are at second reading.

Tonight, pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the main estimates for the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food will be considered in committee of the whole.

As was noted, next week is a constituency work week for members of Parliament when they will be returning to their constituencies to work hard.

When the House returns on May 25, we will continue with business from this week, with the addition of any bills that are reported back from the standing committees.

Added to the list of business is Bill C-23, the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement, and Bill C-19, the investigative hearings and recognizance with conditions legislation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) I would like to designate May 28, 2009 as the date for consideration in committee of the whole of the main estimates for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

• (1505)

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Mr. Speaker, with respect to May 28 for the meeting in committee of the whole to consider the estimates of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, I presume the government House leader, before that date, will be proposing the same procedural motion governing the rules that would apply during the course of that debate. I see he is nodding his head and I welcome that information.

My final point is simply to provide a bit of information that the government House leader may not have in respect of the hoist motion that was moved earlier today having to do with Bill C-8. He may be comforted to know that every major aboriginal organization in the country supports the hoist motion.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Hon. Jay Hill (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order arising out of question period.

I have had the good fortune and the privilege to be in this House of Commons, in this august chamber, for nearly 16 years. I have never seen in that time a display like what was put on during question period by the leader of the Bloc Québécois.

It is absolutely shameful that he would stand in his place, use derogatory and unparliamentary language, and accuse ministers of the Crown of lying. He knows that is unparliamentary language. Mr. Speaker, you indicated that you did not hear the word. It was clearly heard here. Then the member left the chamber before question period concluded and before you could make a ruling.

It is absolutely shameful. I have never seen anything like that. That particular member has been a member of Parliament for longer than I have. He knows better.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask you to review what transpired during question period, specifically the initial question as posed by the leader of the Bloc Québécois, and perhaps you may want to take disciplinary action.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, first of all, he is not allowed to mention my absence. He should be familiar with the Standing Orders.

I also want to point out that I was just echoing what the Minister of Public Works and Government Services said yesterday. In response to a Bloc statement, he said, rather directly, "To say that we are hindering Quebec is an untruth". If he can say that, then I can say that the government tells untruths too. It is the same thing. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.

The Speaker: As I said during question period, I did not hear the hon. member's words. Now he has just repeated them.

[English]

I will review the transcript to which he has referred and the transcript of today's question period. I will look at the remarks of the hon. government House leader and the remarks of the hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie.

[Translation]

I will get back to the House on this issue. In my opinion, such language is unacceptable. Now we have to find out what was said today and yesterday. I did not hear the words during question period because of all of the noise in the House.

Is the hon. member for Joliette raising a point of order?

Points of Order

• (1510)

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I simply want some reassurance of fair treatment. Will you look at the transcript of yesterday's question period, particularly statements made by the Minister of Public Works and Government Services?

The Speaker: I will review it.

Does the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister wish to discuss the same issue?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would simply like to point out that the hon. members of the Bloc did not say to whom this accusation was addressed. We did not accuse any member of this House of lying, on the contrary. Yet that is exactly what the leader of the Bloc has done today.

The Speaker: As I just said, I will look into what was said yesterday.

The hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, when I say that the government is telling lies, I am not addressing a specific individual, but an institution.

When, in response to a question from an hon. member, someone says that member has just told a lie, that is specific to an individual.

I would submit that you ought to be reprimanding the Minister of Public Works and Government Services and not myself. I was referring to an institution, and he to a very specific individual.

I think that the point the parliamentary secretary has just raised is totally in my favour, and I thank him for it.

The Speaker: I will look at all the documents to which the hon. members have referred, and will get back to the House when I have reached a decision.

Another point of order.

[*English*]

PRIVATE MEMBER'S BILL C-309

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on February 25, 2009, you made a statement with respect to the management of private members' business. In particular, you raised concerns about five bills which, in your view, "appear to impinge on the financial prerogative of the Crown".

One of the bills you mentioned was Bill C-309, An Act establishing the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Region of Northern Ontario. I would note that in the last Parliament, the member for Nipissing—Timiskaming brought forward the same bill as Bill C-499, which the Speaker on June 10, 2008, noted appeared "to impinge on the financial prerogative of the Crown".

Without commenting on the merits of the bill, I submit that the bill must be accompanied by a royal recommendation because it would require new spending. Bill C-309 would create a new agency of government and provide for the appointment of personnel. Clause 8 of Bill C-309 establishes the Economic Development Agency of

Canada for the Region of Northern Ontario as a separate and distinct agency of the Government of Canada.

The requirement of a royal recommendation for organizational changes such as establishing a new agency is referred to in the Speaker's ruling of July 11, 1988, on two motions to amend Bill C-93, An Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada. The Speaker said that to establish a separate department of government "undoubtedly would cause a significant charge upon the federal treasury in order for the new department to function on a daily basis".

When an almost identical bill was introduced in the first session of the 38th Parliament as Bill C-9, An Act to establish the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, it was accompanied by a royal recommendation.

The second reason Bill C-309 would require a royal recommendation is that it provides for the appointment of personnel. There are numerous precedents indicating that appointments must be accompanied by a royal recommendation. For example, on February 25, 2005, the Acting Speaker ruled that Bill C-280, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act (Employment Insurance Account and premium rate setting) and another Act in consequence required a royal recommendation because it provided for the appointment of 13 new commissioners to the Canada Employment Insurance Commission. The parent act specified that all commissioners were to receive remuneration.

Clauses 4 and 9 of Bill C-309 provide for the establishment of advisory committees in the appointment of a president of the agency, positions that do not currently exist. Furthermore, the clauses explicitly state that the remuneration of the appointees shall be fixed by the Governor in Council. Provisions for salaries to be paid out of the consolidated revenue fund clearly impose a charge on the public treasury. I submit that clauses 4 and 9 would therefore require a royal recommendation.

Clause 13 of Bill C-309 would also require the appointment of personnel, in this case, the officers and employees necessary for the proper conduct of the new agency. Although clause 13 does not specifically provide for the remuneration of these employees, the Speaker ruled on February 11, 2008 with respect to Bill C-474, the Federal Sustainable Development Act:

Section 23 of the Interpretation Act makes it clear that the power to appoint includes the power to pay. As the provision in Bill C-474 is such that the governor in council could choose to pay a salary to these representatives, this involves an appropriation of a part of the public revenue and should be accompanied by a royal recommendation.

These precedents apply to Bill C-309. The bill would create new spending and therefore requires a royal recommendation.

• (1515)

The Speaker: I thank the hon. parliamentary secretary for his submissions on this matter. I will take it under advisement. I strongly suspect there might be other submissions from another hon. member shortly on this matter.

The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence is also rising on a point of order.

Government Orders

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a point of order out of question period. I want to make it crystal clear to my friend for Chicoutimi—Le Fjord that there are no plans to shut down 439th squadron in Bagotville.

[*Translation*]

The Speaker: The hon. whip of the Bloc Québécois on a point of order.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, again with respect to unparliamentary language, I would call to your attention the very last question asked by my colleague, the hon. member for Shefford concerning research funding to the University of Sherbrooke. Just a few minutes ago, the Minister of State for Science and Technology used the term “dishonest” in his answer.

I would like you to indicate whether the term “dishonest” is acceptable in this House. If not, then I would like you to ask the Minister of State for Science and Technology to withdraw it.

The Speaker: Again, I will review what was said in the House and if there is a problem I will get back to the House concerning the issue raised by the hon. whip of the Bloc Québécois.

ROYAL ASSENT

[*English*]

The Speaker: Order, please. I have the honour to inform the House that a communication has been received as follows:

Rideau Hall
Ottawa

May 14, 2009

Mr. Speaker:

I have the honour to inform you that the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, Governor General of Canada, signified royal assent by written declaration to the bills listed in the schedule to this letter on the 14th day of May, 2009 at 2:33 p.m.

Yours sincerely,

Sheila-Marie Cook

The schedule indicates the bills assented to were Bill C-5, An Act to amend the Indian Oil and Gas Act—Chapter 7; Bill S-3, An Act to amend the Energy Efficiency Act—Chapter 8; and Bill C-9, An Act to amend the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Act, 1992—Chapter 9.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

• (1520)

[*Translation*]

FAMILY HOMES ON RESERVES AND MATRIMONIAL INTERESTS OR RIGHTS ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-8, An Act respecting family homes situated on First Nation reserves and matrimonial interests or rights in or to structures and lands situated on those reserves be read a second time and referred to committee.

The Speaker: Before the question period, the hon. member for Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou had the floor. He has 17 minutes to continue his remarks.

The hon. member for Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou now has the floor.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ) Mr. Speaker, on December 13, 2006, Commissioner David Langtry stated, even before Bill C-11 was adopted, that full human rights protection was now being extended to all first nations people and that the commission would act quickly to open discussions with those communities on how best to implement this much-needed change.

To my knowledge, “discussions” are not “consultations”. The government does not seem to have grasped the intent of this bill. I would like to quote a passage from a report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women:

The committee heard and acknowledged that “the lack of a legal regime to govern the disposition of matrimonial real property on reserves is... the tip of a much greater iceberg” and that “the legislative gap in respect of the matrimonial real property rights on reserve lands is exacerbated by chronic housing shortages that exist on most reserves and difficulties in securing financing to purchase or construct alternative housing on reserve...”

Because of this, women will continue to be forced to leave their communities while waiting for an effective solution to the housing shortage and the full implementation of the right to self-determination. The government fails to recognize this and remains apart from other countries by refusing to support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This situation has existed for two decades and has never been corrected.

In June 2005, the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development tabled a report in the House. Its first finding recognized the importance of the matter of matrimonial real property to the residents of reserves, and, specifically, first nations women and children.

The committee recognized the great complexity of the issues. It also realized that, while immediate action was required, it was imperative that all recommendations be consistent with the government’s recognition of the inherent right of self-government by recognizing first nations’ authority over on-reserve matrimonial real property. The committee felt that any action needed to be taken in consultation and collaboration with first nations.

That was in 2005. Today, because the bill was neither developed in consultation with first nations as they wished, nor referred to the committee before second reading, the Assembly of First Nations considers that it has been so botched that it is practically impossible to put it right after this second reading. In addition, the impact studies conducted on the communities affected by Bill C-8 and the measures they contain to encourage the development of the communities’ own laws on matrimonial homes have not been submitted to either the Assembly of First Nations or the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. The Assembly of First Nations and the Native Women’s Association of Canada want the bill to be defeated.

Government Orders

Like the Native Women's Association of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations, the Bloc Québécois agrees with the idea of this bill, but not with its content or the way in which it has been put together. We feel that it is critically important for the communities and, for that reason, it should have been studied.

What difference is there between Bill C-44, which became Bill C-21, and Bill C-289, which is now Bill C-8? For me, there is no difference except that Bills C-44 and C-289 died on the order paper, and in all cases there were no prior consultations. They also have in common the almost unanimous protest against the method in which they were drawn up and the non-aboriginal view of aboriginal real property. I say "almost unanimous" because the only person not in agreement at the time is now a senator.

This bill, like the ones that went before and the ones that will come after, should have been the result of consultations with first nations, as agreed by the Martin government and the first nations in May 2005. For this bill in particular, the provinces, the territories, the committees of Parliament and the report of Wendy Grant-John, the ministerial representative for matrimonial real property issues on reserve, all should have been consulted.

Unfortunately, this was not the case. The few consultations that were held left participants bitter. They saw them as charades at which they wasted their time. None of their recommendations were accepted, yet the implementation has to be done within their culture and under their administration.

• (1525)

This government should perhaps mention that this bill resulted from discussions with some first nations organizations, the ministerial representative, the provinces and the territories in the summer and fall of 2007. The government should not use the term "consultation" at all.

Once more, the Native Women's Association of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations and the Assembly of the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador oppose this bill because it is fundamentally flawed and practically impossible to correct after second reading. In June 2006, in its report to the House, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women wished to see concrete progress on the issues relating to matrimonial real property rights of first nations women, issues linked to violence against women. It quoted Beverly Jacobs from the Native Women's Association of Canada:

It's not just in first nations communities. We know it's happening all across the country. It's in Canadian homes where women are being abused. We are taking the brunt of it, and I'm tired of it. As a first nations woman, as a Mohawk woman, I'm tired of hearing this. I feel it's my responsibility to make sure it doesn't occur any more. My daughter is 23, and she also had to live through that. I have grandchildren, and I don't want them to live through it. I don't want them to see violence.

The housing problem is still not solved today. In 2001, the government introduced Bill C-289 despite recommendations to the contrary. Here we are again today with Bill C-8, once more with no consultation or collaboration with aboriginal groups.

Aboriginal peoples, particularly women, would be in favour of this legislation which will put an end to centuries of discrimination and inequities enshrined in the Indian Act and visited upon aboriginal women. They do not want to see these errors corrected by another that would be just as serious, if not more so, than the

existing one. This error must be corrected on their terms and in a way that is consistent with their lifestyle and their culture. Above all this legislation must not be the outcome of a unilateral decision by the federal government, which has increasingly demonstrated its ignorance of aboriginal values and of the non-legislative measures inherent in the enforcement of any act or regulation.

There are many irritants. I will mention some of them. First, no non-legislative measure is mentioned. Second, there is a lack of information with regard to the implementation of an action plan. Third, there is also information missing as to resources available to the first nations to develop their laws or the regulations of Bill C-8. Fourth, as mentioned previously, there is a crying need for housing. This situation is in itself sufficient to make this bill's provisions unworkable. Indeed, how, in the case of marital breakdown, can one guarantee decent housing to each of the parties in question? Fifth, this legislation refers to legal proceedings that will lead to trials to clarify the bill's ambiguities. Most of the members of these communities cannot undertake such legal proceedings, because they cannot afford them.

Deputy Grand Chief RoseAnne Archibald, Ontario representative to the Assembly of First Nations Women's Council, stated in June 2006:

We are not convinced that the bill as it stands is going to help First Nations women access justice. Let's be clear, First Nations women and families have waited too long already for equitable and workable solutions and this bill is at best a half-way measure.

After all the consultations, and presentations and drafting of reports: the government didn't listen to our women. In fact, I was one of those women they consulted. Yes they asked for our opinion, but the bill does not reflect what we told them. What they've drafted is very much a made-in-Ottawa Bill."

The Assembly of First Nations Women's Council sees four problems in the bill as it is drafted. It will in the final analysis force first nations women to seek recourse before provincial courts. For many women who live in remote communities, this solution will not be financially viable, among other things because of the time that this would take.

• (1530)

During the consultations, the first nations women asked that matrimonial real property rights be framed from the perspective of their own cultural values and traditions, and not from within the framework of federal or provincial regulations which they did not have a hand in preparing.

Rather than recognizing the authority of first nations, the bill sets out how first nations regulations should be developed, according to a complicated process that makes no provision for supporting first nations participation. In the final analysis, the bill will impose a complex bureaucratic system which will offer no support whatsoever for its implementation.

For matrimonial real property rights to be meaningful, the women told us that the government should see to it that accessible and safe housing be made available.

Government Orders

With regard to the situation in Quebec and Canada, Ms. Wendy Cornet, Special Advisor to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, stated, when she appeared before the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development on March 24, 2005, that:

The common functions of provincial and territorial matrimonial property law are, firstly, defining what personal and real property of spouses is considered matrimonial property within a given jurisdiction; providing a system of rights and protections in relation to matrimonial property on a mandatory basis to married couples; and thirdly, establishing—as all jurisdictions do—a legal presumption of equal division of matrimonial property on marriage breakdown, regardless of which spouse owns the matrimonial property. This last function usually means that a compensation order can be issued by the court, requiring one spouse to pay the other an amount of money to achieve an equal division of matrimonial property—and the couple's assets and liabilities that constitute matrimonial property are taken into account in determining this.

However, in some important policy areas, provincial and territorial laws vary significantly from one jurisdiction to another, in particular regarding the treatment of the following subjects: common-law relationships; same-sex relationships; matters relating to rights upon death of a spouse; and family violence. Some jurisdictions have passed family violence legislation that provides a package of remedies, including interim orders respecting matrimonial real property. Other jurisdictions do not have specific legislation addressing family violence. And finally, another matter in which you find some variance is the treatment of matters relating to support and the matrimonial home.

The Indian act provides for a land management regime that includes a system for making individual allotments of reserve lands to members of the band for whom the reserve has been set aside. However, the Indian Act is silent on the question of matrimonial property interests during marriage and on marriage breakdown. The Indian Act does not provide for, or recognize, a law-making power on the part of first nations in regard to matrimonial property, real or personal.

There are other issues that must be taken into account on reserves. For instance, many first nations do not use the Indian Act system of individual allotments of reserve lands, for example, by issuing certificates of possession, and instead use systems of custom allotment. An individual's status as an Indian as defined under the Indian Act makes them a band member and can affect property interest in and on reserve lands. For example, individuals who are not band members cannot hold certificates of possession.

It is clearly inconsistent on the part of the Canadian government to go forward with this bill, since it committed itself on May 31, 2005 to strengthening cooperation on policy development between the Assembly of First Nations and the federal government. Here is an excerpt from that agreement:

Whereas the Prime Minister, at the April 19, 2004 Canada - Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable, stated, "It is now time for us to renew and strengthen the covenant between us", and committed that "No longer will we in Ottawa develop policies first and discuss them with you later. The principle of collaboration will be the cornerstone of our new partnership."

Clearly the government is not keeping its promise.

It is not rocket science: there must first of all be discussions on the process whereby participation of the Assembly of First Nations in the development of federal policies that have specific repercussions on AFN members can be increased, in particular in the areas of health, skills development, housing, political or economic negotiations and results-based accountability.

● (1535)

Second, they have to address the human and financial resources, as well as the accountability mechanisms needed to encourage the Assembly of First Nations to become more involved in policy making.

That is pretty clear, and I encourage the members to read the remarks I have made in this House since 2006. It should be noted that I have to remind the government of that every time we discuss relations with the first nations. That is not normal.

To conclude, I will give the opinion of the Bloc Québécois, which is sensitive to what is happening in aboriginal communities. The Bloc, like aboriginals, believes that the government should take action. We also take into account the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

The Bloc Québécois expects the government to respect the political agreement. It wants to remind the government of its obligation to consult. The Bloc will ensure that implementation of this new bill does not undermine the recognition of the first nations' inherent right to self-government.

The Bloc Québécois is aware that the Native Women's Association of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations have not fully completed their own analysis of the impact of this bill on their communities. The Bloc also knows that the government has apparently not completed a new study.

We will support this bill at second reading for the sole purpose of trying to make the government understand that it has to undertake consultations and fix the bill so that it reflects the vision and culture of the first nations.

[*English*]

Mr. John Duncan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Madam Speaker, I have enjoyed listening to the two speakers from the Bloc, who are both members of the committee on aboriginal affairs, talk about the legislation. I am also very pleased that they want to see the bill go to committee where we can have a full discussion and full discourse.

I think there is recognition on everyone's part that this will be a significant exercise and that it will take time. We are not naive on any of those fronts.

I heard the member speaking about Wendy Grant-John's role in this, as the ministerial representative. She made some very strong recommendations. She made 33 legislative recommendations, of which 30 are in the legislation.

Would the member please give the government credit for doing a very difficult task where there is an absence of current leadership and direction in filling a vacuum that is leaving vulnerable people vulnerable?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Madam Speaker, I want to thank the hon. government member for asking that question. I also want to thank him for admitting that, if the government had gone to the trouble of conducting proper consultations and involving the first nations in the process of developing the bill at the community level, we might have had the same outcome as we did in committee this morning with the Cree and Naskapi. They were very happy to have been able to negotiate without debating the issue before committees or Parliament in order to be successful.

*Government Orders**[English]*

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I have a press release that was released today. It comes from the Native Women's Association of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations, including the Assembly of First Nations Women's Council. They all agree that Bill C-8 will do nothing to solve the problems associated with matrimonial real property on reserve. They agree that the federal government failed in its duty to consult with and accommodate the views of first nations and that as a result the bill is fatally flawed and cannot be fixed. They recommend that it should not proceed to committee.

I ask my hon. colleague, with whom I had the pleasure of serving on the committee for a long time, why he thinks it will be useful to send it to committee when we know the major stakeholders strongly oppose the bill, they do not see it as having value for aboriginal women and they do not see it as respectful of aboriginal tradition and culture.

• (1540)

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Madam Speaker, I am from Quebec. Quebeckers and aboriginals share very similar situations because they are both distinct nations. We believe that nothing is beyond repair as long as there is life.

We will discuss this bill very seriously in committee to try to find ways of fixing it. If we cannot fix it, at least we will have tried. These people have been deprived of autonomy and rights for decades. They are bound by the Indian Act, which is outdated. If we can succeed in helping them enjoy a more decent quality of life as quickly as possible, all the better.

[English]

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Madam Speaker, I agree with my colleague from the Bloc when he says that the social conditions of Canada's first nations, Métis and Inuit people are possibly Canada's greatest shame. I also agree that the Eurocentric notions often undertaken by government administrations over the years in failing to acknowledge traditional culture and heritage are an oversight we should all be aware of.

I was one of the ordinary Canadians with the Charlottetown accord when we dealt with the aboriginal fifth round meeting. It was driven home to me when we met with women aboriginal elders on issues like this and one woman said that in her community the women are not allowed to run for council or chief. Everyone in the room looked down at their shoes and thought that was terrible. "But", she told us, "the men are not allowed to vote".

In her own way she was telling us they had evolved in their community in a way that would not fit any of our norms and expectations about rights, as it were. The women had found a way to achieve an element of power in the community that worked for them.

I tell this story to illustrate that our Eurocentric notion of what should be imposed on aboriginal communities may be far from showing any respect for the traditions and culture and heritage of those communities. A lot of us feel that this bill is along those same lines.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Madam Speaker, I get the sense that the hon. member's opinion reaffirms our position. True, Canada has a major challenge because of its size. That is practically restating the obvious. Canada is so large and so diverse that it is ungovernable.

Canada and the provinces are going to have to admit that Quebec has learned to recognize the first nations and their distinctive character, and to act accordingly. Just look at the Cree and Naskapi. They almost have self-government now and are very happy, as a result.

[English]

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, on May 11, 2009, the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development led off the debate in the House. One of the statements he made early in his speech was that:

...the bill was developed after exhaustive study, authoritative research and comprehensive consultation with first nations groups.

It would appear that 85% of the recommendations from the government's consultant were rejected by the government. The bill now before this Parliament is the same bill that was before the last Parliament, at which time both the AFN and the National Aboriginal Women's Association totally rejected the bill as irreparable, that it should not only be defeated but withdrawn.

I wonder if the member would care to comment.

• (1545)

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Madam Speaker, we were also contacted by representatives from the Assembly of First Nations and the Native Women's Association of Canada.

As I said at the beginning, defeating this bill immediately would prevent these people from voicing their opinions and trying to change the current position set out in the bill.

Unfortunately, as I pointed out at the beginning, consultations were held, but the recommendations were not taken into account. The government did not work with the first nations. So long as that is the case, there will never be a viable agreement.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Madam Speaker, I appreciate the comments of the hon. member from the Bloc.

[English]

I wonder if he might speak briefly on the notion that has not been discussed too much here this afternoon. That is the notion that Bill C-8 does provide an ability for first nations communities to develop their own laws to deal with this legislative gap on matrimonial real property. The bill provides that mechanism, and in fact, encourages it.

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): The member for Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou has 25 seconds to answer the question.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Madam Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for his question.

Government Orders

There would be a big problem with any bill that pushed the vision and culture of white people on the first nations. We must talk with them and work together.

I maintain that we must do so as quickly as possible.

[*English*]

Mr. John Duncan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to stand and support Bill C-8, the Family Homes on Reserves and Matrimonial Interests or Rights Act.

My concern in all the developments today on this bill is that we are losing sight of the objective. The objective is that we have a legislative vacuum. There are vulnerable people, families and children, who are not covered by any legislation. When there is a marital or common-law breakdown on reserve, this is a problem.

I very much appreciated the question posed by the member for Simcoe North just a minute ago to the Bloc member, because the bill encourages the development of marital breakdown laws at the band level, and it can be done without any requirement or need for ministerial sign-off. Right now, unless first nations are under a self-government agreement, this is very problematic.

As we know, there are 630 bands in Canada. So we need to be concerned about that. Somebody has to take leadership, and the government is taking that leadership. This is what concerns me so much about the hoist motion by the Liberal Party on this bill, because the adoption of the hoist amendment would have the same effect as killing the bill. That is simply inappropriate.

This legislation is the product of a comprehensive process of consultation, collaboration and compromise. Officials from key stakeholder groups, including the Assembly of First Nations, the Native Women's Association of Canada, the first nations' Lands Advisory Board, the provinces and the territories, actively participated in the process.

We keep hearing that there was no meaningful consultation. There was \$1.7 million provided to the Assembly of First Nations regarding consultation on this issue. There was \$1.7 million provided to the Native Women's Association of Canada for further consultation on this issue. There were moneys provided to other aboriginal organizations for consultations on this issue. There were consultations in more than 100 jurisdictions across Canada on the need for this type of legislation.

On the very same day, the aboriginal affairs committee heard testimony from witnesses who congratulated the government on its approach to drafting the legislation on the Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act, and by the way, we approached the drafting of this bill in the same way. We were given kudos for the way we handled it in the Cree-Naskapi amendments and we are being criticized for handling it in the very same way on Bill C-8, the bill we are talking about regarding matrimonial real property.

So I am finding the position of particularly the Liberal Party to be very inconsistent in terms of its approach in this Parliament. However, its approach is very consistent. It fought all the way on the human rights amendments to the legislation in the last Parliament by which our first nations brothers and sisters were put under the

Canadian Human Rights Act, the same as other Canadians. That was firmly opposed by the Liberal Party in the House, and now it is doing, in my opinion, the very same thing.

• (1550)

This is an issue of human rights, of protecting some of the most vulnerable people in society. We are trying to get there and the Liberals are trying to kill the bill.

The NDP and the Bloc are much more realistic in that they want to debate it and have witnesses at committee. I think that is most appropriate, and we would like to do that too.

Maybe it would help to explain a little bit of the complexity of what is going on, why Bill C-8 is so necessary in the context of people living on reserves and the legal complexities at play.

To begin, the bill only addresses interests or rights regarding family homes on reserves and other matrimonial interests or rights in or to structures or lands on reserves. It does not address other matrimonial property, including items such as furniture, cars and off-reserve properties, as provincial and territorial family laws apply to such property.

It is also imperative to have a basic grasp of one unique legal aspect of reserve lands, and that is the collective interest. Under the Indian Act, reserve lands are held collectively and are set aside for the use and benefit of a first nation. In the rest of Canada, land holdings are primarily based on individual ownership. Other legal concepts such as rights, title and interests, must be interpreted in light of the first nations collective interest in land on reserves. All these concepts can come into play when on-reserve couples separate.

Along with the collective interest in reserve land, many houses and other structures on reserves are often communally owned. According to most estimates, up to three-quarters of all on-reserve housing units are owned collectively. Occupants typically rent space in the units from first nation councils. In some cases, individuals purchase or build a house on first nation property. It varies greatly from one community to another. I know communities where 100% of the housing is actually individually owned.

First nation membership often adds another level of complexity. All members of the first nation have an interest in community-owned lands and properties. When married couples living on reserves separate, these and other factors complicate the division of property and interests, of course.

Bill C-8 proposes a clear set of rules to address this complex matter. Under this legislation, couples living on reserves would be able to access a range of rights and remedies similar to those available to couples living off-reserve, through a provisional federal regime.

The bill also contains provisions for first nations to create their own regimes, to adopt laws governing the use, occupation and possession of family homes, for instance, along with other on-reserve matrimonial interests and rights.

Government Orders

Members of the House know all too well that this legislative gap has continued far too long. Legislation in this area is long overdue. The provisional federal regime included in Bill C-8 addresses pertinent issues that, along with other changes, will grant spouses living on reserves an equal right to occupy the family home, prevent one spouse from selling or mortgaging the on-reserve family home without the consent of the other spouse, enable a court to issue emergency protection and exclusive occupation orders on an urgent basis, particularly in instances of domestic violence, and ensure that divorced or separated spouses share equally in the proven value of matrimonial interests and on-reserve properties, including family homes.

Furthermore, when a spouse or common-law partner dies, Bill C-8 will enable the surviving spouse to occupy the family home for a specified period of time and to apply for half the value of matrimonial interests.

Finally, in cases where both spouses have signed written agreements on these matters, the legislation will enable the court to enforce these agreements.

This legislation protects not only the rights of individuals, but also the collective rights of first nations. With the exception of emergency protection and confidentiality orders, whenever an application is made under the bill, the first nation may make representation to the courts about the cultural, social and legal context relevant to the proceedings.

Finally, the proposed legislation also includes provisions for the enactment of community-specific laws in this area. Consistent with the democratic process, the first nation members must support the proposed law through a community ratification vote before it can become a first nation law. As I explained earlier, this can all occur and is enabled by this legislation without ratification by the minister. The minister is not involved, assuming the bill is adopted.

•(1555)

The proposed legislation offers a thoroughly researched, judiciously balanced solution to a long-standing problem. Bill C-8 would have a positive and tangible effect in first nations communities. It would close a legislative gap that erodes public faith in our justice system and it would engage first nations in the development of laws that satisfy the needs of their members.

I am confident that once my hon. colleagues study Bill C-8, they will join me in supporting it. We will see about amendments. We have not closed any doors. I am sure this will be a long exercise but it is one that we should look forward to and embrace because we are doing something very important in terms of human rights and in terms of protecting the most vulnerable in society.

There is no area where the federal government has a bigger responsibility than to take leadership in these areas. If we do not take that leadership, it would be an abdication of our responsibility. I really do not know who else can provide a nationally organized effort in this regard. It is our constitutional responsibility.

We keep hearing members of the Liberal Party say that aboriginals are totally opposed to the bill. This is something that we must think quite seriously about because we know from the consultation process that many individuals with serious concerns would support this

initiative. The vulnerable individuals in the communities, however, are very reluctant to support this important bill when their leaders and aboriginal organizations are taking an opposite view. However, those are the very people we need to be concerned about. We cannot let the objective of the legislation be lost because we are having a political discourse as opposed to one that concerns itself very directly with the well-being and welfare of individuals.

A submission was made in 2008 to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women from the Canadian Feminist Alliance that said:

While there is some disagreement among the Aboriginal women's community... about how quickly the government should proceed on this issue...this is a straightforward issue requiring immediate action.

I would submit that this is a very important statement. It is much easier for women to go to a women's organization as opposed to aboriginal women going to an aboriginal women's organization if they know their position will be automatically rejected because of a political agenda. I think they made a very important statement.

•(1600)

Before today's press release, we had the Native Women's Association of Canada recommending that interim legislation be put into place that guarantees that first nations women will have matrimonial property rights equivalent to all other women in Canada. That is a very important statement and that is what this legislation attempts to do.

I will close on debating this hoist amendment that would have the effect of killing the bill. I believe we have ended up having discourse on the entire direction of the bill, but that is appropriate as well at this time.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am absolutely astounded that the government continues to suggest that somehow the bill, which is fundamentally flawed in its principles and in the underpinnings of the legislative items within the bill, should go to committee where some amendments can be made, as the member said.

The process in this place is that once a bill passes second reading, we are giving approval in principle to the principles and the fundamental principles. If members have ever tried to change the intent of legislation at committee, they know they will be out of order. It cannot be done at committee, which is precisely why AFN has called, not only for this bill to be defeated, but to be withdrawn even before second reading. It had the same position on Bill C-47 in the last Parliament. It said that this bill does not work, that it cannot be repaired and that we had to start again with proper consultation.

Some consultations did take place by the government's own consultant but 85% of the recommendations of the government's own consultant were rejected.

The issue here is that there is not one first nations group anywhere that supports this bill. The government must recognize that there is a problem and that it cannot go forward and force this bill upon Parliament or first nations when it is so fundamentally flawed.

Government Orders

I have a question for the parliamentary secretary. What benefit is it to impose a bill on first nations when there is an understanding that there has been no meaningful consultation and nothing has happened since the last Parliament when the AFN passed a resolution to have the bill withdrawn? What benefit is it to have the minister come before the House, give a 15 minute speech and say that there was comprehensive consultations and then leave the Chamber and not come back to face questions in the House?

What kind of consultation is that? What is the perception of the AFN and first nations across the country when the minister himself is not prepared to stand in front of Parliament and answer important questions on a very important bill?

•(1605)

Mr. John Duncan: Madam Speaker, I am rather surprised by the statement of the member for Mississauga South from the standpoint that the minister is not shy about defending the weak and vulnerable in any way, shape or form. The fact that the minister is making announcements along with first nations leaders in the north and not here is one of his duties and it is an important duty.

As the member just said, there is a problem with the bill. There is a problem with the bill and it is the Liberals over there who would like to kill it. The member also said that nothing has happened on this bill since the last Parliament. Well, I think that is the problem. Unless the government takes leadership, nothing will happen and the weak and vulnerable will continue to be in a legislative vacuum without any protections, which would be most inappropriate. We are doing what we are doing to provide leadership on this.

The other two opposition parties in this place have recognized their responsibility. They do not want to kill the bill. They want to see if there is a way to amend the bill. I did not say that we were taking it to committee to make amendments but I did say that we do not have closed minds about this in any way, shape or form. If we had said that, the member would be critical for a different reason, quite legitimately.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Madam Speaker, I just listened to the member from the Liberal Party talk about the fact that he was astounded by the principle of the bill. The principle of the bill is to give a very vulnerable community the same rights as the rest of the community, to give aboriginal women property rights.

The parliamentary secretary to the minister said very clearly that there were 103 consultations and that millions of dollars were spent consulting the broader community. It is a principle in many of our laws that when there are communities of vulnerable people, we have special provisions in law, vis-à-vis the law we have for those who are trafficked and get into a situation where they cannot speak freely.

We have done due diligence to ensure these consultations have gone deep. We have really listened to the broad spectrum of those who are vulnerable.

Does the parliamentary secretary have any idea what the motivation could be to stop a bill concerning fundamental human rights? I do not understand but maybe he understands the agenda that is at play here.

This bill needs to happen. It cannot be hijacked for six months. It needs to be done. The international community is even saying that. We need to ensure that vulnerable women in our native communities have the same rights that the rest of Canadians enjoy.

•(1610)

Mr. John Duncan: Madam Speaker, many UN bodies and commissions have been totally critical of Canada for having a legislative vacuum in this area, for not protecting the vulnerable living on reserves. We are responding to all of that.

If we are looking at motivation, I do not want to see politics get in the way of doing what is right. I see a surplus of politics at work here, especially today on this legislation. I do not really want to participate in that or attribute motivation beyond that but we do need to get on with fixing what is wrong.

I also heard that 85% of the recommendations of the minister's special representative are not reflected in the bill. I do not know where that number came from. That is a political number. Thirty of the thirty-three legislative recommendations are in the bill. She had 64 conclusions, many of which related to broad issues and non-legislative issues. I just do not know where that number came from and I do not think the member from Mississauga knows either.

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Madam Speaker, my question is for the parliamentary secretary to the minister, who says he is not opposed to amendments.

Can he tell me why his government chose not to send this bill to committee before second reading?

The committee would have had more latitude to hear witnesses and amend and shape the bill to reflect their legitimate claims. When a committee receives a bill after second reading, it is set in stone a bit more, because it is approved in principle, which restricts the kind of amendments that can be made to it.

Why did his government choose not to send this bill to committee before second reading?

[English]

Mr. John Duncan: Madam Speaker, when this bill was in the last Parliament, that member's party wanted to get it to committee after second reading in order to do exactly what we are asking be done right now. The other two opposition parties are supporting us in this endeavour.

If I were to suggest that this legislation will go to committee and that we absolutely oppose any amendments, I would be rightfully taken to task for that, but I am not going to say that. We are always in listening mode, particularly when we know there will be lengthy hearings on this and lots of witnesses.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am very proud to participate in this debate. It is an issue which is very close to my heart and my political past, present and future, if I may put it that way.

Government Orders

I had the good fortune to be a member of the House when the question of the patriation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was before the House. I realize, looking around at some of the younger members in the House, that may strike them as a remarkably long time ago.

I had the opportunity to be present when the historic amendments were presented to the patriation bill, which advanced the cause of aboriginal self-government, by recognizing that the Constitution that was being adopted by the House could not take away from or deviate from existing treaty and other relationships between Canada's aboriginal people and the Government of Canada. That was accepted by the House and became a very important feature that allowed patriation to take place.

Subsequently, I became a member of the provincial legislature in Ontario and, as such, was very proud to have been able to participate in discussions around very important first nations issues that were discussed at Meech Lake and in Charlottetown. When I had the honour of becoming premier, I spent the first year of my mandate negotiating with the aboriginal chiefs in Ontario a statement of relationship between the Government of Ontario, and the nation-to-nation understanding that we were determined to reach between the Government of Ontario, and the first nations and aboriginal people of the province.

I do not come to this debate without a certain degree of history attached to its importance. After listening to the comments that have been made about the bill, I wonder really where everyone has been because the whole direction of public policy, affirmed very strongly in the report of the royal commission which was appointed by Prime Minister Mulroney, has been to recognize that we need a new relationship between the first nations people and the Government of Canada.

That relationship has to be one based on a profound mutual respect. It has to be based on a different and renewed understanding of the importance of the principle of self-government, what that means and entails, and we have to abandon the paternalism that is entrenched, seeps through and permeates the Indian Act. We have to move beyond that to a new relationship.

We have been able to do that in a number of situations and circumstances where new treaties have been signed and negotiated, but it must be said that since the defeat of the Charlottetown accord we have not been able to make the kind of progress in self-government discussions, which certainly I would have hoped and argued for.

I want to say in all sincerity to the parliamentary secretary, who has presented this afternoon the case for the bill and against the hoist motion which has been proposed by the Liberal Party, that I do not look upon this as a partisan issue. I really do not. I do not see this as an issue which, as he says, he does not want to see become politicized.

The whole question that is being discussed is not one that can be subject to an easy formula. When he says, for example, that this is as a result of the government's determination to do something on behalf of the most vulnerable, it is the phrase "on behalf of" about which we have to think through its implications.

Everyone in the House has to understand that if we are to take government-to-government relationships seriously, and I feel this very strongly as a member of Parliament, it means that I do not have a right to pass legislation that applies to first nations people and to first nations reserves unless that legislation has the full support of the people on whose behalf it is being proposed.

• (1615)

We have to abandon the kind of paternalism that unfortunately underlies this legislation. It simply is not possible at this time in our history for us to take this kind of approach. I know it is difficult. I know it is frustrating. I know it is costly. The parliamentary secretary has spent some time focusing on how much money was involved in consulting with the first nations people.

All I can say is, I want to see clear evidence that the legislation has the full support of the first nations governments of this country, has the full support of the first nations, those who are responsible within the first nations community and those who have a strong position, those people who sat across the table from me at Charlottetown, and those organizations which were represented on an equal basis sitting with us throughout the negotiations on the Charlottetown accord. We did not pass the Charlottetown accord over the heads of the people who were at that table. We only passed it because it had their support.

Was it difficult to do? Of course it was difficult.

[*Translation*]

I just listened to the comments made by members of the Bloc Québécois and the NDP. Frankly, I am a bit surprised. I would have thought that it had long been recognized that the first nations have the right to govern themselves and take responsibility for their own affairs in the new Canada we want to have and are trying to build. It cannot be said that the proposed legislation reflects that absolutely crucial idea of our real Constitution and, I would say, our future as Canadians.

• (1620)

[*English*]

However well meaning the bill may be and however much the government may believe that it has found the answer to a problem, the simple fact of the matter is that this legislation does not meet the fundamental test, that it has the active support and approval of the people who are being affected by this legislation. If we were to take self-government seriously, if we were to take that principle seriously, we would have to recognize that the legislation should not proceed in its current form, which is why we have moved the hoist motion.

Government Orders

I am disappointed that my colleagues in the New Democratic Party and in the Bloc Québécois do not take the same position. I am particularly disappointed because, knowing the history of those parties and knowing the position that they have taken on the question of self-government, knowing that it was the leader of the New Democratic Party in 1980 who moved the amendments to the patriation act that in fact ensured that treaty rights were recognized fully in the Constitution, knowing of the long history of Parti Québécois governments in the province of Quebec with respect to the importance of recognizing nation-to-nation relationships, and knowing the sensitivity of the Bloc Québécois to any notion of paternalism from those coming from outside, determining what is right and what is wrong, then I am doubly surprised, not shocked, but surprised.

I do not know what the fate of the hoist motion will be. Obviously, if the bill were to proceed to committee, we would do our very best. My colleague from Ottawa—Vanier made what I think was a very good proposal, which was that if the subject matter of the bill were referred to committee, we could have a without-prejudice discussion of some of the issues.

I want to emphasize one point. The parliamentary secretary made some comments about how people were prepared, perhaps, to come to the government who were not prepared to go to other native organizations because of what he referred to as the politics of the situation.

I have here a press release dated May 14, which is today, in which the Native Women's Association of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations and the AFN Women's Council united to express their opposition to the federal Bill C-8. It states:

The organizations are in agreement that Bill C-8 is a one dimensional approach to a complex problem that does not address the real issues in communities.

It goes on at some length to describe the reasons why they are opposed to the legislation, not that they have concerns about it, not that they want it to go to committee, but that they oppose it.

I have to say to my colleagues in the New Democratic Party that this will be the first time, certainly in my recollection, in which that party has voted to take a position with respect to an approach to legislation that is completely contrary to the leadership and to the membership of the organizations on whose behalf the legislation is being proposed. To put it mildly, I am surprised that would be the position of the New Democratic Party.

Be that as it may, it seems to me that we do have a responsibility as members of the House. We do have a responsibility to take self-government seriously. If we are to apologize for past errors, it is not enough to apologize for the mistakes that have been made in the past and then to say that despite that, we will still go ahead and pass legislation because we know better.

When the parliamentary secretary says that the UN says we should do it, then I am completely baffled. This, from a government which has refused to ratify the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, is a complete contradiction. I have never heard a good word about the United Nations coming from across the way with respect to any of its approaches to human rights, and on this one issue he picks

some kind of report out of context and says that this is what we are supposed to do.

I sincerely believe that if we are to take self-government seriously, that means not simply that we consult and say, "Thanks very much for your point of view, but we will go ahead and do this anyway", but it means that we have to respond in a different way. We believe on this side of the House, in the Liberal Party, very strongly that measures such as these can only be taken if they have the full support and approval of those who are responsible, in leadership positions, in the first nations and aboriginal communities.

● (1625)

The parliamentary secretary said that some of the reason for this opposition was what he called "politics". If he is saying that the leadership of the AFN has some kind of agenda, which does not allow it to support the legislation, he should tell us what he thinks that agenda is. I do not believe it is necessarily the case. He says that someone has to provide the leadership, that it can only come from the federal government.

This again repeats the same kind of paternalist thinking that has so bedevilled the discussion about aboriginal rights and the position of aboriginal people in Canada. The question of aboriginal property, the question of matrimonial property is difficult. The first problem is there are not enough people who have housing on native reserves. There are not enough people who are sufficiently housed to cope with the existing situation.

The cost of going to a provincial court structure can be expensive. The cost of going to a provincial court mediation process can be expensive. That is why the ministerial representative, who put forward her proposals, made it very clear. She said:

The viability and effectiveness of any legislative framework will also depend on necessary financial resources being made available for implementation of non-legislative measures such as programs to address land registry issues, mediation and other court related programs, local dispute resolution mechanisms, prevention of family violence programs, a spousal loan compensation fund and increased funding to support First Nation communities to manage their own lands. Without these kinds of supports from the federal government, matrimonial real property protections will simply not be accessible to the vast majority of First Nation people.

When Wendy Grant-John made that statement, she was not simply saying that this was something that was by the way, or by the side. She was saying that unless the government came forward with a full package that was effectively negotiated with those people who were being effective, what the government wanted to do would not even happen. The people the government points to as "the most vulnerable" will not be protected. This issue has to be addressed by the government.

Now more children are being taken into custody by provincial authorities and taken off-reserve and out of their families. Today more of that is happening than even at the time of the residential schools question. With respect to what is happening to aboriginal first nations families on reserve, there is a greater crisis today than perhaps there was in the 1950s and 1960s.

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I know there is a certain point of view that would say that by passing this legislation, the House will begin to address some of these questions. I do not believe that for one second and neither does the leadership of the AFN, neither does the leadership of the Native Women's Association and neither does the AFN women's council. They are right. Those issues require a comprehensive discussion, negotiation and resolution between the Government of Canada and the native leadership with respect to those issues.

The AFN is being forced to go in front of the Human Rights Commission in order to argue the case that there is discriminatory funding as between what is happening to families on-reserves and what is happening to families off-reserve. These questions need to be resolved. This legislation does not resolve it. Nor does it touch it.

For my friends in the Bloc and the NDP who say let us get this legislation into committee and we will deal with it, the answer is no they will not. They will have to deal with the measures in front of them. They will have to deal with the legislation which the government has presented, which has a certain approach, a certain philosophy and a certain direction. That direction is to go the provincial courts and get the issues settled there and give the provincial courts the mandate and the mechanisms to deal with the problems that exist on-reserve with respect to family breakdown and the matrimonial home. In the current circumstance I do not think that will work. It will not work without a much greater degree of thought and resolution of the question than has been presented by the government.

• (1630)

I am in support of the hoist motion. I hope it is successful. If it is not successful, the bill will go to committee. That is what the Bloc and the NDP have said they think it should do. However, in all seriousness, they have to think through very carefully the implications of forcing a bill into committee against the will of the AFN and the Native Women's Association. Those organizations were represented during the constitutional discussions. They were present and participated in those discussions.

This disturbs me a great deal. Effectively, they are breaking away from the previous pattern that was set by the governments of Canada with respect to how we would make legal changes of this dimension. We would make them not simply with the consultation, but with the active consent of the first nations people of our country.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Madam Speaker, my hon. colleague mentioned his contributions to the issues that Canada dealt with in respect to our charter. There is no doubt history will recognize that he made contributions in that regard.

However, our charter also speaks to important equality protections. Sections 15 and 28 compel the government of the day to ensure that it holds up these important rights and protections, especially protections that would provide, as the bill would, the same kind of rights and basic remedies for women and children on reserve.

Notwithstanding that one must respect the consultation and that the leadership in first nations communities must have a mechanism to evolve the laws and rules of their own, which Bill C-8 does, the government of the day must take actions to compel those equalities, such as essential protections for the rights and protections of women and children against violence.

Notwithstanding his eloquent comments, does the member not believe that we should, in this case, stand on the side of protecting women and children against violence and giving them the same rights and remedies as all other non-aboriginal families across the country?

Hon. Bob Rae: Madam Speaker, I do not see a word in the bill that deals with the question of family violence. I would invite the member to have a look at the press release that came out today from the Native Women's Association of Canada. It said:

—Bill C-8 should be scrapped in favour of a new approach. This may include non-legislative measures such as local dispute resolution processes and community-based solutions. The urgent need for housing, counselling services and emergency shelters on-reserve must also be addressed.

That is not contained in the bill, and I am quoting from President Jacobs in the press release. She went on to say:

Aboriginal women, girls and children continue to be subjected to violence and are often forced to leave their homes and communities to be safe. Aboriginal women have consistently stated that they want safe communities where they, their children and future generations can live. Above all else, any resolution needs to ensure that this happens.

The reason I quote this at length is because it is important that the government reflects on what it is hearing. What it is hearing from the leadership of the women's movement in the first nations community is the bill does not do it. If the bill does not do it, my view is it should not be passed.

If the Native Women's Association of Canada says that the bill should not be passed, but should be scrapped instead and we pass this legislation on behalf of native women, I have a problem. I think we all have a problem. We have a fiduciary obligation. We cannot just say that we think this is a good idea so we will pass it. I have to listen to the people who say that there are things I do not understand, that there are unintended consequences to what has been proposed that will happen as a result of what I pass. When they tell me not to do it, I listen.

• (1635)

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Madam Speaker, there are a couple of things that need to be stated. The member laid out his background on the issue. He stated that there were issues that needed to be dealt with and that the bill would not get it done. He stated that in his view this should not go farther.

What we heard was an excellent overview of a critique of a bill that can happen in this place and it can happen at committee, and it is exactly what many of us want to see.

Government Orders

I know Beverley well. I do not think it is fair or smart to say that if we are against the motion right now, as a group, as a party, then we are not with native women. I hope the member is not saying that. I would like the member to clarify that. I think that many of us, who have been with Beverley and others on a regular basis on these issues, clearly want to work with them. Maybe we disagree on how we get this done.

If we vote against this, it is not against native women. It is about doing it differently and doing it in another way. Hopefully if we do get to committee, the member will support a critique and open the space for native women there.

Hon. Bob Rae: First, Madam Speaker, I was quite sincere when I said at the beginning that I did not regard this as a partisan issue. I will not attack the motivation of any other member who has a different position than I have. I fully appreciate that people have very strong views with respect to individual rights, women's rights, gender issues and see this as being fundamental to the question.

I think my colleague across the way from Simcoe, whom I have known for a long time, said that we take our obligations under sections 15 and 28 seriously. If the hon. members goes back and looks at the debates that took place in 1979, 1980 and 1981, we wrestled with the question of the balances between self-government and sections 15 and 28. Those debates will go on long after the hon. member from Simcoe and I gone. They will continue and that is a healthy thing in a constitutional democracy.

For my colleague, the member for Ottawa Centre, I respect his views a great deal on this question and on many others. My problem is it is a question of how seriously we take self-government. If we take it seriously, we have to listen to the people who tell us not to pass the bill. We have to listen to the ministerial representative who has said that there are all kinds of ancillary questions and all kinds of other questions that have to be dealt with properly, but they will not be if the bill is passed in its current framework.

My concern is a lot of things are being sought by those who are critical of the bill, which that the bill itself does not address and the bill itself cannot address. What those people are looking for is a broader approach and commitment from the government than they are currently seeing. That is the challenge we are facing.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Winnipeg South, CPC): Madam Speaker, I have a quick question for the member opposite. I know he has been talking about consultation as have his other colleagues. Clearly the Liberal members did not consult their opposition party members in relation to their motion.

As an aboriginal person from the west, having met with many first nations women, clearly there is a great desire to have the opportunity to have matrimonial real property rights. I know the member is suggesting that there needs to be unanimous consultation. We as parliamentarians, when we see something that needs to be rectified, we need to act.

Would the member not agree that we, as parliamentarians, need to extend this opportunity to first nations women?

• (1640)

Hon. Bob Rae: Madam Speaker, I will try to state my view in as clear a fashion as I can, and the member is certainly entitled to disagree with it.

I think the way I expressed it in the debate was to say this. I do not believe the House should be passing legislation which in my view inherently touches on self-government and on other aboriginal rights with respect to property and to self-government without their consent. That is my position.

My position is the House cannot, as it did with the Indian Act in the same old manner, say that it knows best, that it knows what has to happen, that it will do this and will take these steps. I do not believe we have the right to do that.

Mr. John Duncan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Madam Speaker, I listened with great interest, and my position was invoked many times.

The question I would ask of the member for Toronto Centre is this. There is a fiduciary obligation on the part of the government. He described the bill as being paternalistic. I believe it is not paternalistic. I believe there is a fiduciary obligation. Would the member like to comment?

Hon. Bob Rae: Madam Speaker, the member and I may have a different view of what that fiduciary obligation is. I certainly believe we have a fiduciary obligation with respect to the rights of all Canadians, and constitutionally the federal government obviously has a responsibility with respect to first nations and those who are described as Indians in the Indian Act.

I also believe we have a fiduciary obligation to recognize that there is an inherent right to self-government. I have spent most of my political life arguing in favour of that, sometimes in situations where it was very difficult. If we are to take self-government—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): I regret to interrupt the hon. member, but the time for that debate has expired.

[*Translation*]

It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra, Public Safety; the hon. member for Don Valley West, Employment Insurance; the hon. member for Avalon, Employment Insurance.

[*English*]

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Vancouver East.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to rise in the House today to be involved in this very important debate.

I was in the House earlier when I heard our member for Nanaimo—Cowichan, who is the aboriginal affairs critic for the NDP, lay out the concerns we have with the bill, but she also laid out the concerns we have with the hoist motion. In the back and forth exchange that goes on in the House, it was actually rather disappointing to hear what came from Liberal members.

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I cannot think of any other member in the House who has worked harder on aboriginal affairs than the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan, not only in her own community but across the country. She is a strong advocate for aboriginal people and brings forward their issues to this Parliament.

To hear from Liberal members that by supporting the bill we are denying the rights of aboriginal people was, frankly, very perplexing and makes me wonder what kind of political agenda is going on here. The issue we have is with the hoist motion and what it would do.

In terms of the bill that is before us on matrimonial real property, as the member earlier outlined, it is an issue that has been outstanding for decades. The treatment of aboriginal people is really a black mark on Canadian history, and the fact that so much has been left undone. We arrive at points of crisis in so many communities, whether it is around housing, water, education or self-governance, because we have not paid attention to these issues over so long a time.

I actually remember the debate in the House of Commons on the Nisga'a treaty, which was the first modern-day treaty in the province of British Columbia with a first nation. I remember the clash with the Conservatives, who were then the opposition, who opposed the bill. There were hundreds of amendments. We spent 72 hours going through those amendments.

The clash was over the issue of individual rights, property rights and collective rights. There was a fundamental lack of understanding by the Conservatives at the time, who could not agree to a treaty that did not enshrine individual property rights. It showed a lack of understanding about the history of first nations people on this land and it showed a lack of sensitivity about the traditions, values, practices and processes that have built up over thousands of years.

So it is interesting that here we are again today debating this issue, which again involves fundamental rights and recognition of aboriginal practices and history.

It is clear, though, that there is a very serious issue here. There is no guarantee or insurance that the equality and rights of women are being upheld in the aboriginal community. We see difficult situations. We see situations of poverty and of violence. They are systemic and long-standing. I would agree that this legislation is not going to fix all those things. Nevertheless we have to recognize that at some point there has to be a process and a place where these issues will be dealt with.

Wendy Grant-John, the ministerial representative on the matrimonial real property issues on reserves, is very well known in B.C. and across the country as a leader. Her report was significant in documenting, as a result of her consultations, what this issue is about.

In the conclusions and recommendations in her report, she states very clearly:

The diverse laws, policies, and legal traditions of First Nations are reflected in the approaches taken by them to allotment of housing, to land and to family relationships. The diverse experience and responses of First Nations to the process of colonization are also reflected in their contemporary laws and policies... Accommodating and respecting this diversity must be an element of any legislative initiative respecting matrimonial real property on reserves.

● (1645)

Then she further states:

The basic scheme of the Act would be a concurrent jurisdiction model with paramountcy of First Nations law where there is inconsistency or conflict with either federal or provincial law with respect to matrimonial property. In this regard, the maximum scope of lawmaking responsibility should be left to First Nations' jurisdiction and federal activity should be as minimal as required to meet human rights concerns.

The observations contained in this report that were left largely unaddressed by the government are very important considerations as we deal with this bill. We are now at the critical point of deciding what is to be done. We have a bill before us and the Liberals have moved a hoist motion, which I find surprising. If that is their response to the bill, it is removing this critical issue that needs to be dealt with from the legislative process. A hoist motion is just that: It takes the bill out. It is gone forever, for all intents and purposes.

We in the NDP find this very perplexing and think a preferable course of action would be to recognize that this bill is flawed, and again, the NDP member for Nanaimo—Cowichan was absolutely clear on that this morning. She laid out some of the difficulties with this bill.

It is the process that is important here. We want to ensure there is a process that will produce an outcome that creates the public space for the Native Women's Association of Canada, the AFN, local groups and other organizations to be able to talk about this bill and actually articulate what needs to be done, based in part, I am sure, on the conclusions and recommendations that came from the ministerial representative I just quoted.

From a practical point of view, we have a lot of concern about a motion that will, in effect, shut down debate on this issue. It is up to the committee to hear testimony from organizations that are directly involved, to hear directly from first nations and to change the bill. The committee may decide at that point that the bill should go. That is a mandate of a committee, to look at that legislation and decide what needs to be done.

We need to take that step, allow the space to be created and ensure that this debate does not get halted and that we do not just hoist the issue out of the air and say, "That is that end of that. We hope the government will bring it back and we are going to put some pressure on them". The fact is that we are in a legislative process right now. We have the opportunity to make sure that people are heard and to come to the right conclusions about what we are hearing. That is the important point.

I take great offence not so much to the comments that were made by the member for Toronto Centre a little while ago, but some of the comments made earlier by the Liberal members debating this bill and equating the fact that, because we do not support their hoist motion, somehow we are opposed to aboriginal rights, that we are not upholding the rights of women and that we do not want to deal with this issue. Nothing could be further from the truth. I find it quite offensive that this line would be taken. In effect, it has now politicized the issue.

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Again, as the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan said earlier this afternoon, let us not politicize this issue. Let us work with people in a real way, bring in the representatives of first nations and have an intelligence discussion. Let us look at the bill and recognize the fundamental flaws it has.

I have been reading some of the material from the Native Women's Association of Canada and I know that even in my own community in east Vancouver there are very strong arguments that need to be spoken to in terms of the fact that there have not been even short-term programs and policies enacted that would deal with the serious situation facing women and children with regard to family breakup and the separation of children.

● (1650)

Every day in my community in east Vancouver, I see people come off reserve into the urban environment seeking jobs and housing. They find a situation where life is very difficult and where the programs, the supports and the work environment are not there. We are now facing a tragedy in many communities.

I would agree with the Native Women's Association of Canada. They make it very clear that the practical yet critical issues of violence, poverty, chronic shortage of houses, lack of shelters and second stage housing in communities must be addressed on a priority basis. I absolutely agree. We should be using every avenue we have to do that. In fact, we should be using the bill to draw attention to it. If we can get it into committee, we can focus and highlight the tension on some of these issues.

We heard a report today from Stats Canada about the incredible increase in the number of women who are using emergency shelters. Most of these shelters are completely overburdened. This is happening today, and it is very alarming.

To think about these issues, to take action and to use the powers we have as members of Parliament, to use the legislative process to the fullest capacity we can to put the spotlight on the bill, to point out those significant flaws and to point out the inadequacies of the bill and what needs to be done is where we should be going.

Here we are debating a hoist motion, and we are accusing each other of this and that. I really hope that if the bill does go through on second reading and it goes to committee that the Liberal members will pay full attention to ensuring the debate happens and that witnesses come forward so we can work together and put pressure on the Conservative government to do the right thing. I think that is very critical.

A number of years ago, as the housing critic for the NDP, I travelled across the country and looked at housing situations. I was very familiar with housing in the urban environment and the homelessness that was increasing at that time. Of course, it is still a serious question. I also went to a lot of smaller communities, including in northern Manitoba.

One of the most shocking things I saw was in northern Manitoba. It was not the only place. There are other remote communities on reserve where the housing was so appalling that I could see the gap between the window and the frame and the weather coming in. People did not even have running water or sanitary facilities. I could not believe my eyes. I thought I had seen the worst housing possible

in places like the downtown eastside. It was only when I went north and saw housing on reserve that I began to understand how serious the situation was with first nations people living in deep poverty in third world conditions.

The worst of it was that this housing was built by CMHC. This was actually government built housing that was meant to be safe and adequate for families.

I remember meeting family members. I met a mother in Churchill who told me her child had been taken away by the family services because she was homeless. It was not because she was a bad mother; it was because she was homeless. She was living in a shelter, she was couch surfing, and her kid was taken away.

In my own community, this is a very familiar story. It is almost like a new kind of residential school. Children are taken away because the resources are not there to support the family. The number of children being taken away from aboriginal families is very alarming.

Those are all issues that are underlying the bill. I would certainly agree with some of the comments that have been made today by Liberal members and others. That is what we have to address. The question remains how we address it and where one begins.

● (1655)

I think we have to begin with the powers we have. We have to use those powers in a way that is responsible and in a way that people who are impacted by this debate, first nations, are actually participating in that debate.

The way to do that is to send this bill to committee and hear from those folks. The committee will then make a determination as to whether the bill is to be amended and whether changes can be made that are satisfactory. Based on the testimony they hear, the committee may make another decision. I really hope the Liberals will support that if this bill goes to committee.

As I understand it, by supporting the hoist motion we will in effect be abandoning this issue. We will be abandoning the legislative process that is open to us to focus on this very important issue of matrimonial real property. We will be shutting out voices that need to be heard.

We will be saying that we will just keep the pressure up and it will be dealt with. That means another 23 years will probably go by. It was 23 years ago that the Supreme Court of Canada made it clear that new laws needed to be enacted.

There has been so much time that has gone by. We need to ask if there was so much concern about this issue from the Liberal members why nothing was done during their term in office. This issue went on and on. It was unattended to, and here we are today.

I feel we are taking a responsible course of action. We are making a responsible decision. For others in this House to go after our members and say we do not care or we do not support this issue is really quite outrageous.

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I would like to thank the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan for the amount of work she has done in bringing this and other issues into the House. She has been tireless in that effort. I know that members of the Bloc are also hopeful that this bill will get to committee.

Her only goal, our only goal, and we would hope the goal of other members in the House, is to make sure these issues are addressed and not abandoned as they have been year after year.

That is where we are. There is a lot more work to be done. The House will be recessing sometime in June. I think it is very important to begin that discussion with first nations, women's organizations and the parties affected to begin a genuine process to figure out whether the bill is to be changed or defeated.

That has to be done at committee. That is what is open to us, and that is what we should be using.

• (1700)

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I know the hon. member sees these issues very much in her community, as we see the issues affecting first nations people in our communities. I have five first nations communities in my riding. Some of them have situations that are akin to the type of deplorable conditions we would only find in third world countries.

As the AFN has been requesting for a long time, I would like to ask my colleague if she thinks one of the root things this Parliament has to do in consultation with first nations communities is to scrap the Indian Act and replace it with something within the legal framework of our country established with first nations people that would more enable first nations communities to develop, expand and create the development they require.

Right now they are actually hamstrung by the Indian Act in ways that others cannot even hope to imagine. In fact, those in a non-aboriginal community have one-fourth the amount of administrative and bureaucratic red tape to go through versus an aboriginal community. That is deplorable. It is a huge obstruction to aboriginal communities being able to develop and become economic masters of their future.

Ms. Libby Davies: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member knows, the NDP has long been a champion of aboriginal self-governance and we have supported the treaty process.

I began my remarks by speaking about the Nisga'a treaty, which was the first modern day treaty that was negotiated. It came through Parliament. It concerned the lands of the Nisga'a in British Columbia.

The Indian Act is an archaic thing. People in my community see it as very paternalistic, authoritarian, and prescribing limits on people's lives, potential and capacity.

The NDP has always stood up for the implementation of first nations governance. We have always supported that, and we have supported accelerating the treaty process. However, how that is done is very important. If the Indian Act is to be just thrown out, I think the key is that it is not done in the way that was contemplated by the Liberal government but in a consultative manner. Whether it is this bill or the Indian Act as a whole, it has to be a fair and just process

that includes people so the outcome is actually going to serve those communities.

• (1705)

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to pursue the point about the role the former Liberal government took in 2003-04. I was involved in some of the committee hearings around the legislation. At that time, the minister, supported by the government of the day, brought forward four bills. I recall this because I was part of the filibuster, led by the Bloc and the NDP member for Winnipeg Centre, to oppose that legislation at committee.

When one looks at the history of the Liberal Party and sees that it voted with the Conservatives on the most recent budget, which I do not even think mentioned the first nations, I want to ask the hon. member if there is any credibility to the party's position today in terms of the hoist motion.

Ms. Libby Davies: Mr. Speaker, first I would like to congratulate the hon. member for Windsor—Tecumseh on his award yesterday as the most knowledgeable member of the House. We should listen to his words, because he knows more than the Liberal members, I think. Congratulations to him on his award.

I remember those filibusters in the committee. I, too, sat in on some of the sessions that went way into the night. It is a reflection of how not to do something. It is history and those things happen. In a way, it is a tragedy. We are debating these same issues today about violence, safety, homelessness, lack of housing, poverty, and lack of rights that we were debating eight or nine years ago, going back to the court decision in 1986, and 100-plus years ago. That is the tragedy of this.

The NDP wants to focus on a process that is right, that involves people, that gives space in a committee for voices to be heard so that we can get this bill right or throw it out if it is wrong.

Hon. Keith Martin: Mr. Speaker, I want to advance some ideas for dealing with poverty in first nations communities, on reserve and off reserve.

There are a couple of concrete solutions that the government needs to address, and I will ask the hon. member if her party would support these. One is to make sure there is equal funding for aboriginal children versus non-aboriginal children. Right now there is a huge discrepancy in funding. This is deplorable, because kids cannot have access to the resources they need to get the education they require if there is such a huge difference in funding.

Second, there are places like Attawapiskat where the conditions are so bad that kids are freezing in their schools. How can they possibly learn when they are wearing parkas and they are frozen to the bone? Other communities, like mine, in Pacheedaht, have been on boil water advisories for huge chunks of time. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs ignores their requests repeatedly. How can one have communities on Vancouver Island where they do not have access to potable water? It is absolutely remarkable.

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The basics are not being addressed by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, which has a huge budget.

I ask the hon. member what she thinks of truncating the size of the department of Indian affairs, downloading those responsibilities with the capacity building on the ground so people can take care of themselves and that first nations communities have the structure for direct investment that will enable them to generate funds to provide for their people.

Ms. Libby Davies: Mr. Speaker, the most terrible thing is that none of the issues the member has raised are new. How many times have we heard the member for Timmins—James Bay raise in the House what is happening in his community around the school situation? There are many other communities. It is also happening in the urban areas to aboriginal people who are off reserve.

I am very frustrated that we are still talking about a rethink of what we should be doing. The principles here are of upholding aboriginal rights, recognizing the need for self-governance and providing the resources. That did not happen under Liberal governments. It has not happened under Conservative governments.

We feel a very strong responsibility in our party to be the strongest advocates possible to make sure that these issues are addressed in terms of the systemic issues and legal issues so that we do not have to go through some kind of rethink, but that we actually begin to provide the resources that are needed today to ensure that every aboriginal man, woman, child and family are living in dignity and respect in our society.

• (1710)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to say right off the bat that I will support the motion, but I want to explain why. In doing so, I hope to convince my colleagues in the NDP and the Bloc to seriously consider that the avenue we are suggesting might be the better course.

I want first to demonstrate that, under the able stewardship of the member for Simcoe North as chair of the aboriginal affairs committee, the committee has been demonstrating exemplary cooperation. I see him nodding his head in agreement. We have had the opportunity to deal with two bills already.

[*Translation*]

Those bills were Bill C-5, An Act to amend the Indian Oil and Gas Act, and Bill C-28, this very day.

In both cases, the government bills were supported by representatives of the aboriginal communities and the responsible bodies concerned with the issues involved. They appeared before us. In one of the two cases, the bill was tweaked slightly with government consent. That was done unanimously. Today, a minor amendment was made to Bill C-28, and the bill was passed without much discussion.

I raise this point for two reasons. First, to demonstrate that, as far as the official opposition is concerned—and I dare say in this instance also of the two other parties in opposition—there is a desire for cooperation and for doing things properly. The other reason is also very important. In both cases, the bills passed in committee after being passed here at second reading had the unconditional support of

the aboriginal communities. That is not the case for Bill C-8, and I feel that needs to be said.

[*English*]

I want to talk about the process for awhile. Parliament is a wonderful thing. It shows flexibility, ingenuity and a way sometimes of dealing with things in different ways, to improve our ways, to make sure that people are heard, to make sure people have an opportunity to express themselves in respect of an overall democratic will.

This is the 40th Parliament. In the 39th Parliament what I am going to talk about happened three times and in the 38th Parliament, which is where it started in earnest, it happened quite often. I am talking about referral of a government bill to committee before second reading. This is something we must consider very carefully.

In a minority Parliament in particular, that means that before a bill is adopted at second reading, it is referred to a committee. The government can do that on its own. It can determine that a bill will go to committee after five hours of debate whether the opposition parties want it to or not. The difference between referring a bill to committee before second reading or after second reading is very important. After second reading the House has stated its approval in principle of what is contained in the bill. Amendments are very restricted in nature. They can constrain, or they can orient a little more precisely certain things, but they cannot expand. Therefore, the capacity of a committee to change a bill is very different if the bill is adopted and referred to committee after second reading as opposed to being referred to committee before second reading. That is crucial for a number of reasons.

That was done over 30 times in the 38th Parliament. I thought that demonstrated a willingness to engage parliamentarians of all parties in shaping legislation. Beyond that, it involved the witnesses and those interested in the legislation as they came to committee because it gave a wider range to parliamentarians in effect to give shape to the legislation.

In the 39th Parliament, it happened three times. In this Parliament it has not happened yet. In the 39th Parliament and this Parliament, even though at times opposition members recommended and the House approved the notion that bills be referred to committee before second reading in order to have that flexibility, that capacity to engage the witnesses, to really engage the expertise in the country to shape legislation as a better expression of the common will, it has not been happening. It has not happened a single time in this Parliament.

I know my colleague from Simcoe North knows what I am talking about because I brought this up at committee. It is an act of respect of Parliament for a minority government to ask that legislation be referred to committee before second reading. It gives the ability of all members on that committee to bring a constructiveness to it. It gives an opportunity to all witnesses to be taken seriously, and perhaps to suggest amendments. It engages all kinds of NGOs. It engages academia. It engages the private sector. In this case it certainly would have engaged the aboriginal communities across the land, the same aboriginal communities that have said they are not supportive of Bill C-8.

Government Orders

I was listening very closely to my colleague from Toronto Centre and my colleague from Ottawa Centre and they were not contradicting each other. My colleague from Ottawa Centre said we should send it to committee where we could amend it and I totally agree with him. Let us send it to committee where the committee can do some real work and shape this legislation and have the witnesses engage in shaping it so that it becomes a constructive exercise and not a confrontation exercise as it might turn out to be if we do it this way.

That is why the motion to defer the matter for six months would give the government an opportunity to consider seriously consulting widely.

• (1715)

Honestly, I would have preferred if the government had chosen to send the bill to committee before second reading. I do not think we would be having this debate. The committee is working very well. It could have demonstrated to Canadians its capacity to do so. It could have engaged the aboriginal community in a very thorough manner, taking whatever time was needed, having as many meetings as were needed in order to listen to proposals and suggestions. The committee has demonstrated that ability and it could have demonstrated it even more so.

Because the government chose not to do that, we are now caught in the situation where our party, I think very legitimately, is saying that because the Assembly of First Nations and the Native Women's Association of Canada are saying they do not like the bill, we should hoist it. The hoist motion calls for a delay of six months.

If the government would step back and consider that perhaps the bill should have been referred to committee before second reading, this would all be over. The committee has demonstrated its capacity to work, to fully engage in a very serious matter. It could engage all the witnesses that want to be engaged in a constructive legislative exercise. Unfortunately, because the government chose not to refer the bill to committee before second reading, we are into the current situation.

[*Translation*]

Once again, I would ask my Bloc Québécois and NDP colleagues to consider one point very seriously. We are not opposed to sending this bill to committee. However, we would like the committee responsible for studying it to have the kind of freedom that it cannot have if the bill goes to committee after second reading. That is crucial.

From what I can tell, today and for some time now, we have been getting very clear signals from aboriginals, from the Assembly of First Nations, from the Native Women's Association of Canada and other stakeholders. Personally, as a member of the committee, I have heard from a lot of people. They are very concerned about this bill, about how it was written, about what it contains, and about what it does not contain. If we have to restrict ourselves to a more limited range of amendments because the House has passed this bill at second reading, we will end up limiting Parliament's ability to do good work. I suggest that my colleagues give that some serious thought.

If—all together—we do tell the government that we want to do this work, that is fine, but let us do it with the latitude, flexibility and desire to be constructive that this committee has demonstrated so far. All of the committee members, whether they represent the NDP, the Bloc, the Liberals or the Conservatives, have demonstrated good will and the ability to work well together.

I had hoped that the government would seize this opportunity to try to resolve, once and for all, a problem that has been around for years, even decades, to resolve it constructively, which a minority government or Parliament can do if it so chooses. That would have been a strong indication of the government's respect for Parliament and for aboriginal communities in Canada. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case. We believe that we should not proceed with the bill as written. Aboriginal communities are not happy with it.

I also think that there is another reason this bill is a step in the wrong direction.

• (1720)

[*English*]

It is another topic that we broached at committee time and again and I hope we explore even further. I see my colleague from Simcoe North nodding again. It is the concept of honour of the Crown. I readily admit that I am not yet grounded enough in the concept to fully comprehend all of its ramifications, but I know that it is rather far-reaching.

The honour of the Crown concept is one that has been invoked by the Supreme Court in matters dealing with aboriginal communities to strike down legislation. The last time I heard it was used was by the aboriginal communities in British Columbia to basically tell the government that it cannot sell properties, as it was planning to. The department had this plan to sell nine properties, two of which were in B.C. and two of which were subject to land claims by aboriginal communities. Because the government had not consulted these communities, the Supreme Court essentially said that the honour of the Crown concept applied and it could not sell those two buildings. They were withdrawn from the package of assets of buildings that the Crown was selling.

The honour of the Crown concept is a concept that applies to all things aboriginal and beyond that. In this case, I would think that if we were to proceed with this bill in the manner we are proposing, which is to force it through the House at second reading so that the committee is restricted in its ability to give it shape, listen to the witnesses and give voice to their concerns in a constructive way, the bill would be subject to court challenges quite readily if it were to become law.

As legislators, we have a duty to try to prevent that. We have a duty to construct good law according to principles that were established in our Constitution. If we were to proceed this way, when we have heard that the consultation might not have been as thorough or as listened to as the aboriginal communities would have hoped, perhaps we would then be creating faulty legislation that would be subject to fairly serious challenges on this notion of honour of the Crown. This must permeate what we do as agents of the Crown. We are Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. The government is her agent. Together, we have responsibilities toward the Crown.

Private Members' Business

I am not sure that proceeding this way is the best way to fulfill these obligations or fiduciary responsibilities. We can call them what we will. As we continue the work in committee, I would hope that this concept becomes much more well understood by members of the committee and beyond. I think it is a concept that we will see coming much more to the fore as we try to honour the new spirit of working with aboriginal communities throughout this land.

• (1725)

[*Translation*]

I will sum up briefly because I only have a few minutes left.

My colleagues must understand that we are not trying to avoid taking action or to reject everything. We are telling the government that there is a more constructive way to approach a very delicate problem. I believe all parties agree that the bill attempts to resolve a very complex and delicate situation.

To draft a law that will be accepted by everyone, we must all put a little water in our wine and we must be prepared to hear from those most affected. Those people have been telling us for weeks that they cannot support this bill and they have asked the government to not proceed with it. That places us in a difficult situation.

I will come back to my basic premise: had the government truly wanted to give parliamentarians the latitude to work together and create a bill to reflect the collective will of all political parties and all aboriginal communities, it could have referred this bill to committee before second reading. It chose not to do so.

Earlier, I asked the parliamentary secretary why the government did not do so and chose instead to force a vote at second reading.

The government is therefore asking for approval in principle. It has chosen to limit the committee's power, after having listened to witnesses, to propose constructive amendments and—together—the government and the members of the three opposition parties—to develop a bill that we could all have been proud of. It could have taken another approach.

The members of the official opposition take their duty seriously. By proposing this motion, we are telling the government that it is not taking the right approach.

I will make a last appeal to the good will of my Bloc and NDP colleagues. What we are proposing today could be avoided altogether if we all told the government to refer the bill to committee before second reading. We must give the committee, which has already demonstrated its competence, the tools to do the work that is needed. We have a great deal of listening to do. We must listen to all those who wish to participate. We must take their grievances into account. When we find contradictions and disagreements, we must look for common ground.

As responsible parliamentarians, we must find a way to produce a bill that really reflects the government's responsibilities and our responsibilities as parliamentarians, our responsibilities under the Canadian Constitution and our responsibilities that arise from Supreme Court of Canada rulings.

This all could have been moved ahead by referring the bill to committee before second reading. I do not know why the

government, a minority government, stubbornly refuses to refer any bills to committee. Many committees, such as the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, which I mentioned earlier, have a proven record.

The chair of that committee, a government member, is nodding his head in agreement with my assertion that the members of that committee have proven that they work well together.

Both bills we studied were fully supported by aboriginal communities. However, aboriginal communities are not in favour of the bill we are being asked to support here today, and that is a serious problem.

I implore the government to reconsider its approach and do its homework over again in order to come up with a solution that will be better for everyone.

• (1730)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 5:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[*English*]

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCY OF CANADA FOR THE REGION OF NORTHERN ONTARIO ACT

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.) moved that Bill C-309, An Act establishing the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Region of Northern Ontario, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak to Bill C-309. This proposed legislation looks to take the current federal economic development initiative for northern Ontario, otherwise known as FedNor, and convert it into an agency.

Before I go into the details why I believe FedNor ought to become a full-fledged government agency, I would like to discuss two main facts about the Canadian economy.

The economy of Canada is not one homogeneous entity. Different regions face different challenges. They have different growth rates, different strengths, and different weaknesses. Each region is unique and deserves special attention so that it can flourish and allow its residents to provide for their families and to live a decent and prosperous life.

Contrary to what the Conservative government believes, the federal government does not have an important role to play in promoting and encouraging the full potential of Canada's regions.

Having said this, there are a number of steps that can be taken by all levels of government to promote regional economic development.

Private Members' Business

First, there must be a fundamental recognition and understanding of the fact that different regions require different policies to develop their full economic potential. One size does not fit all when it comes to economic development. It is only by understanding that regions have different economic potential, that the essential building blocks can be put in place to ensure that full advantage can be taken of all available resources.

Second, the structure or, perhaps more important, the people who operate the structure have to understand the impact that they have on the economy, so that adjustments can be made on an ongoing basis to ensure that the economic realities of that region are being properly addressed. These changes are most effective when they are proposed by local people who are most directly affected by the impact of their recommendations.

[*Translation*]

So, having the structure in place is important. What is crucial, however, is that the people in charge understand what is happening in the regional economy. That being said, I would like to talk about the programs we have in place at this time.

[*English*]

Prior to the announcement made in budget 2009, the government had four regional economic development organizations. There were three agencies, which were the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, better known as ACOA, Canada Economic Development for Quebec Regions, better known as DEQ, and Western Economic Diversification Canada.

Then after the 2009 budget SODA was added, Southern Ontario Development Agency, as well as the new regional economic development agency for the north. Now we have five different entities. One is a program and the rest are agencies. Why is northern Ontario different than all the rest?

Let us look at the difference between a program and an agency. The minister will tell us that words “program” and “agency” have no effect under Canadian law. He is right. Under Canadian law, there is no difference, but as far as Parliament goes, there is a difference. What separates FedNor from its counterparts is that each of the counterparts has an act of Parliament establishing it as a separate entity and outlining its mandate and powers, while FedNor does not.

The status of an agency in legislation means that the federal government requires the consent of Parliament to change or alter the agency's powers or its mandate.

In essence, a program can be changed, manipulated or even eliminated on a whim. We know the Prime Minister has often spoken of eliminating regional economic development programs and agencies. He does not believe in them. This is something that really worries me, losing everything we have because the Prime Minister decides he does not believe in them any more.

This bill would protect us from all governments, future and present. We know the present one does not believe in it, but future governments have to be protected as well.

The regions have their differences and those differences have to be respected. The Conservatives will claim that the free market system will take care of everything. We know that is not the case. We have

just gone through the last six months, which have been outrageous, and it really has not worked for us. If we go with a free market system as the Conservatives would like, we would end up with some major centres in Canada, perhaps five large urban centres where the mass of the population would live and the regions would have nothing. There would be a vast waste land in between them. Everything would gravitate to where it is cheapest for large providers to provide services. That is not my Canada.

One of the other arguments that comes up is financial reporting. Currently FedNor's performance and financial reports are included as a chapter of Industry Canada's reports on plans and priorities and departmental performance reports. It is not a big chapter.

As a separate agency, under the Financial Administration Act, FedNor would be required to file detailed financial and performance reports for tabling in Parliament. The reports on plans and priorities would outline the agency's objectives, programs, spending plans and departmental performance reports, which evaluate whether the objectives have been met and provide the details of previous spending.

Let me elaborate on what that means in simpler terms. As an agency FedNor, would file estimates. Estimates give full details of what is planned for the coming year. From this, one can take a much closer look at the list of proposed funding and activities that are being planned and managed for the upcoming year, so they have a good vision of where the economic development is going in a certain region.

As a program on the other hand, the details become lost as part of the budget of Industry Canada. This means that as it stands now FedNor, as a program, really has no details. There is no breakdown of activities. There is nothing but a few numbers which imply that the program can be played with by the Prime Minister at his will or the minister himself.

Unlike an agency, reports for a program can only be seen at year end. To add insult to injury, it takes another six to eight months before those numbers come out, if we are lucky. After year end, we have to look at the detailed compilation of expenses, activities and reviews, but that is as much as 18 months after the beginning of the process.

It is like driving a car and concentrating on the rear view mirror. We cannot really look to the future. We are seeing what is behind us all the time. With regional economic development, we really have to look ahead and see where we will go, where we want to be and what kind of programs we want to have in place.

Private Members' Business

• (1735)

A prime example of what I am talking is this. Recently at the industry, science and technology committee, I asked the minister for detailed estimates for FedNor for the upcoming year. When I asked for those details, he said that he could give me something called "Northern Spirit", which is a brochure. It is very colourful, it has beautiful pictures and it has all kinds of neat stories in it. I am sure some of the members on the other side were disappointed because the pictures were already coloured in. It was a really pretty brochure with no numbers, not one. It was basically a pamphlet that was handed out. We looked at it and put it aside.

What we are looking for is estimates, something that breaks down exactly what we can expect over the next year, and then plan for it.

• (1740)

[Translation]

Another problem is that the program does not have a minister to look after that and that alone. Under the Liberals, we had a minister of state for FedNor. Since the Conservative government has been in power, there has been no minister for FedNor. That portfolio now comes under Industry Canada, and that worries me.

Just this morning, I was speaking with a municipal councillor from northern Ontario. He said FedNor has received a number of applications, but they are still sitting on the minister's desk. They are sitting there and have not been approved. From what I have heard, nearly \$8 million could be put into the economy. That money is not in the economy; it is sitting on the minister's desk. I understand that industry is a large portfolio and I am sure the minister must be very busy. However, we cannot forget the smaller regions. I know he is kept busy by the auto industry and many others, but northern industries like forestry are vital to northern Ontario. It is very important that these investments be approved so they can return to northern Ontario's economy.

Something I often think about is the fact that the people of northern Ontario are not second class citizens. We are Canadians like everyone else, like all voters. So, if a program exists, it should be given the same level of respect as an agency. That is the goal of my bill.

[English]

The Conservatives said previously that they did not intend to support Bill C-309 because it would lead to an increase in costs in bureaucracy. That is nonsense. Corporate services is one of the big areas at which they look. They say that every agency will need corporate services and that Industry Canada takes care of it for FedNor. That is not true. FedNor already has its own corporate services and communications division. If it were turned into a separate agency, creating these divisions would not be an issue. Some Conservatives will also argue against the conversion for FedNor.

We know, overall, Conservatives are not known for nation-building. They do not instinctively bring people together. They are use to wedging, getting groups apart and conquering, which is one way of doing things. I am not here to judge anybody and telling them whether it is right or wrong, but that is not the way the Liberals do it.

The Conservatives do not look at the big picture. Everybody does their own thing. That is not the way to build a nation.

If the Conservatives had it their way, and we have heard the Prime Minister say it before, they would leave the economy to its own devices. In light of what we have seen over the last six months, that is not always possible and I do not think it works in the long-term. That may work in short spurts in the short-term and then we get booms, but the busts are what hurts. Government does play a role in what is done in the economy.

If we left the economy to its own devices, we would see a migration of people from regions to major centres. They would migrate to a few metropolitan areas and that would be it for Canada. Canada would be very sparsely populated in between because the concentration would be in the large cities, and we can understand that.

That is not my Canada. I do not believe most Canadians want that. They want to know they have the possibility of earning a living anywhere in Canada. This is not about being in just an urban centre. It is about being everywhere in Canada. My Canada includes northern regions and rural regions. My Canada includes all of Canada.

Since the Conservatives took office in 2006, the FedNor budget has been slashed by nearly \$6 million. Bill C-309 is designed to ensure that FedNor would not be subjected to further cuts or elimination altogether.

Bill C-309 is designed to promote economic development, economic diversification and job creation in communities throughout northern Ontario. A FedNor agency would demand greater accountability and would be required to report to Parliament on a regular basis.

My Liberal colleagues and I are committed to ensuring that the residents of northern Ontario are given every opportunity to develop and maintain a strong regional economy, as well as diversify strength in their employment base. Residents of northern Ontario expect and deserve the same opportunities, the same access and accountability and the same quality of service as their fellow Canadians in all other parts of the country.

Bill C-309 has received widespread support from municipalities throughout northern Ontario, including the Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities. I trust my hon. colleagues from the three parties in the House will also support the bill based on its merits.

• (1745)

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have heard over the years innuendoes that FedNor money is being channelled to southern Ontario. Could the member enlighten me as to whether this is true? If it is true, does he know how much FedNor money is being spent in southern Ontario?

Mr. Anthony Rota: Mr. Speaker, that is a rumour that has been around for quite some time. There has been a rumour about money being funnelled into southern Ontario from FedNor. It is not quite true. This has been going on for a number of years.

Private Members' Business

There is the community futures program that allows for economic development on a smaller scale and allows small operators to get money. It is a loan program. That money is administered by FedNor out of Sudbury for all of Ontario. That is very important because it is not FedNor money but it is being administered from Sudbury in northern Ontario. Those are federal jobs being put into Sudbury and not centralized in Ottawa. They could have been anywhere in the world.

That is a case for regional economic development in northern Ontario. Business can be conducted from anywhere in the world with today's electronics and programs. With everything that is out there, one can have pretty well anything one wants in northern Ontario. This is a prime example of how federal services put in place by the Liberal Party are creating jobs in Sudbury for the rest of Ontario.

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary for Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand in the House today to discuss northern Ontario and specifically the role of FedNor, the regional economic development organization for northern Ontario.

As the Minister of Industry told the members of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology, our strategy is "if it ain't broke, don't fix it".

Our government continues to build a healthy future for northern Ontario and for most economic growth through the delivery of FedNor's northern Ontario development program and the community futures program. It is no secret that FedNor receives broad-based and universal support from mayors, community leaders and other stakeholders in northern Ontario. The reason is simple: it works.

I will now talk about the fine work that FedNor does in northern Ontario through the northern Ontario development program, or NODP.

By hearing more about FedNor's role in northern Ontario, I hope all members will garner a better understanding of how much this organization impacts on the lives of northerners. FedNor does much more than simply fund individual projects in the many communities it serves.

When community partners, leaders and stakeholders identify opportunities for development in northern Ontario, they come to FedNor with these ideas and their proposals. FedNor staff is closely connected to the communities they serve and they know the challenges and needs of those communities.

FedNor works with project proponents to ensure how best to meet their needs. It considers the benefits of specific projects on a local, regional and pan-northern scale, working with partners to maximize the impact of FedNor projects. In short, FedNor takes a truly holistic approach to economic development, funding projects that will collectively strengthen the whole of northern Ontario.

To accomplish this, FedNor focuses on specific sectors or areas of northern Ontario's economy, keeping in mind that each project builds the capacity that is needed to undertake other worthwhile initiatives.

At the same time, FedNor delivers the Government of Canada's agenda in northern Ontario, such as our economic action plan. New

initiatives, such as the community adjustment fund, will help us keep the economy of northern Ontario moving.

Canada's economic action plan will have a direct and positive impact on the economy of northern Ontario and FedNor will continue to work closely with northern Ontario communities and industry leaders to ensure that our efforts meet their specific needs.

FedNor supports northern Ontario projects that complement our government's strategy to promote a competitive, knowledge-based nation. In 2007-08, the northern Ontario development program's annual grants and contributions' budget totalled more than \$36 million.

I will now illustrate how FedNor is using this budget successfully to grow the northern Ontario economy. First, I will give some background. The northern Ontario development program covers a large geographic area. Northern Ontario represents about 90% of the province's land mass. It stretches from Muskoka to James Bay and from the border of my province of Manitoba to the border of Quebec. This great part of Canada is also home to more than 850,000 people.

The vastness of northern Ontario, given its relatively low population, helps explain some of the challenges, including: geographic isolation from large, urban markets to the south; limited telecommunications and transportation infrastructure; static or declining population; high youth out-migration rates; and a lower than average employment growth. FedNor's northern Ontario development program is working to address these issues and much more.

Specifically, the northern Ontario development program promotes economic growth in northern Ontario through the delivery of contributions funding. Funding is directed primarily to not for profit organizations for projects not eligible for commercial financing and projects that are key to the development of capacity in the north. Program contributions are available to support projects in six areas: community economic development, innovation, information and communications technology, human capital, business financing support, and trade and tourism. FedNor is making a real difference in each of these areas.

In the area of community economic development, FedNor focuses its efforts on strategic planning to enhance business competitiveness and job creation. To help communities deal with the challenges of sudden or severe downturns affecting the local economy, FedNor supports diversification strategies. Never have these types of strategies been more important than they are today during these difficult economic times.

● (1750)

One excellent example is the northern Ontario value-added initiative, or NOVA. This three year initiative is introducing communities affected by the downturn in the forestry sector to new forestry related economic renewal opportunities. NOVA representatives have undertaken a tour of about 200 mills and secondary forestry related operations to introduce this program.

Private Members' Business

In essence, the project is supporting the development of value-added products and improvements to manufacturing processes as well as providing market access information. In addition to its diversification initiatives, FedNor also promotes regional initiatives that build strong, sustainable communities. One such initiative is the Northern Centre for Advanced Technology, or NORCAT. The Northern Centre for Advanced Technology is one of a cluster of premiere research and development organizations in northern Ontario that our government has supported through FedNor.

With FedNor's help, NORCAT has grown to become a leader in the development and commercialization of new mining technologies. In fact, in April 2008, this government invested \$2 million of FedNor funding into NORCAT to construct a state of the art building to house a new incubator facility and centralize NORCAT'S technology development and industrial services. This NORCAT centre will provide the private sector with one-stop access to NORCAT's industrial training and innovation services. It will also bring to the region a new service for small businesses and pre-commercial entrepreneurs.

Once complete, the centre will accommodate up to 22 small and medium size enterprises by providing flexible rental space, access to labs and workshops, as well as business and technology support services. The positive impact of this investment in NORCAT will be felt in northern Ontario for decades to come. It is but one example of the great work FedNor has been able to accomplish under a Conservative government.

Projects like this are building the capacity that northern Ontario needs to diversify its economy. That is community economic development.

To keep moving forward, we must ensure that we have the human capital to support our efforts to build a strong northern Ontario. In that light, FedNor supports other important initiatives that provide northerners with the opportunity to remain in and contribute to their respective communities.

One concrete example is FedNor's successful youth internship program. In the summer of 2006, FedNor celebrated the placement of the program's 1,000th youth intern. Since 2002, FedNor has invested over \$35.7 million in youth related projects across northern Ontario. Designed to help post-secondary graduates make the transition from the campus to the workplace, this program provides interns with hands-on experience and an opportunity to find full-time employment in the north. It also helps to stem the tide of youth leaving northern Ontario, which has long been a serious issue in northern Ontario.

We know that only 25% of young people who leave northern Ontario for education or employment opportunities ever return. FedNor is serious about providing opportunities for its best and brightest to ensure they remain and contribute to the future of northern Ontario. As an added benefit, the internship program also provides employment assistance for small businesses and not for profit organizations that are looking to grow.

It is important for the communities and businesses of northern Ontario that FedNor remains flexible and responsive as an organization to benefit the people it serves. As members will hear

from my colleagues, FedNor's other areas of focus are also bearing fruit across all of northern Ontario.

• (1755)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by saying that the Bloc Québécois will support Bill C-309, An Act establishing the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Region of Northern Ontario, which was introduced by my colleague from Nipissing—Timiskaming. It is not that we support federal government interference in regional development, but if the people of northern Ontario and the Government of Ontario want to create an agency, the Bloc Québécois would obviously be ill advised to oppose it.

The purpose of Bill C-309 is to establish the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Region of Northern Ontario, which, like the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, would be responsible for promoting the development of northern Ontario in accordance with an integrated federal strategy.

The Bloc Québécois defends Quebec's interests, and that is why in the past we voted against Bill C-9, which created the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec. Members will say that we are being inconsistent. We voted against creating an agency in Quebec, yet we support creating an agency in Ontario. I have no problem with that, because if the people in northern Ontario want to create such an agency, then naturally we will support them.

The Bloc Québécois believes, as all the governments of Quebec have believed for more than 45 years, that in order to be able to develop an integrated policy on regional development, Quebec must have control over regional development programs. I will explain this further during my speech.

As my colleague has just said, the regions are the ones with the solutions. Quebec in particular has organizations that focus on the socio-economic development of their regions. These organizations are in a position to properly advise the minister on regional needs and to help with program implementation. The local development centres were created specifically to develop the regional economy and to advise ministers in order to ensure that the investments made would be as cost effective as possible for regional development. Over the years, we have also created another kind of organization, the regional conferences of elected officials, which bring together all mayors and other elected officials in each of the regions. Obviously, they examine every file relating to regional development and they, too, are well placed to provide the minister responsible with proper advice.

The Bloc Québécois is aware that not all governments have the same priorities. Despite the fact that the agency is joyfully trampling on Quebec's toes in its jurisdiction, if the Government of Ontario has decided to welcome this structure into its regional economy, we cannot do otherwise than agree, as I said. It must be pointed out as well that Ontario has been hit very hard by the economic crisis, northern Ontario even more so because of the forestry crisis and the decline of the auto industry.

I would like to make the point that a true regional development strategy needs to include a broad range of components: natural resources, education, training, municipal affairs, land use, infrastructure and so on, none of which are in any way federal responsibilities. In fact, the Canadian Constitution entrusts most things that concern regional development to Quebec and the provinces.

In order to be in a position to create an integrated regional development policy, all of the governments of Quebec in the past 45-plus years have been demanding control of the regional development program.

Between 1973 and 1994, an agreement was in place between the Government of Quebec and the government in Ottawa. According to it, Ottawa could not invest in regional development without the agreement of the Government of Quebec. In 1994, that agreement was broken. Since that time, there have been two parallel structures in Quebec, those of the Government of Quebec and those of the federal government, which both invest in regional development.

Very often the two are in conflict with each other, because the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec sets priorities for itself that are not shared by Quebec or the regions of Quebec. This clash of regional development systems is a very common occurrence.

Another phenomenon has also cropped up since the Conservatives have been in power.

• (1800)

As my colleague mentioned, the government made deep cuts to the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec's budget. Those cuts were significant.

Since 1994, the agency has been investing in research and development organizations responsible for supporting businesses. I could list all kinds of organizations in every region of Quebec that were responsible for helping small and medium-sized businesses conduct research and development and bring their ideas to market.

Small and medium-sized businesses do not necessarily have the financial means to do research and create and launch new products. That is why the agency invested in those kinds of organizations. Then, suddenly, two years ago in 2007, the agency withdrew its support. That is the problem with having two parallel regional development systems. The Canadian agency withdrew, and now a lot of those organizations are in trouble. Basically, the entire structure that the Government of Quebec and the regions of Quebec built over the years has been demolished.

I can provide actual examples of that in my region. Among other things, the forest research centre, which was supported by the Canadian agency, was unexpectedly told that it would have to begin turning a profit within about two years. That was utterly impossible. That kind of development will no longer be happening. The federal government must understand that regional development cannot happen without taking into account each region's priorities and those of the Government of Quebec.

Earlier, my colleague from Abitibi—Témiscamingue was talking about the Minister of Industry. I should point out that the Minister of

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Industry was responsible for the agency, and he is the one who cut funding to several organizations in Quebec. The new minister tried to restore funding, but I do not think that he tried hard enough, because instead of restoring the funding, organizations were simply given an extra year within which to become profitable. It is no secret that most research and development organizations will never be profitable because they do research and development to bring products to market. It takes years and years to turn a profit, and that is not what these organizations are meant to do. Their role is to support businesses, not replace them. That is where the government made its mistake.

Earlier, my colleague said that the Minister of Industry was very busy because there are files piled up on his desk. I would say to him that is probably the same tactic he used at the Economic Development Agency of Canada because everything ended up on his desk. Files would languish and he was accused—I believe rightly—of engaging in petty politics, cheap politics, by using the funds of the Economic Development Agency of Canada. In my opinion, the same thing is currently happening at Industry Canada. It is the same minister.

Let us be serious. He probably used the same tactics and is probably continuing to use the same approach. That means files were not dealt with, files are languishing and will continue to do so because he has to look at all of them, one by one, and he does not trust anyone, especially not the directors of agencies in Quebec and probably not Industry department officials.

I am being told that I have one minute left. Therefore I will repeat that the Bloc Québécois will support the creation of a development agency for northern Ontario because that is the decision of the people who live there and of the Ontario government, and that is important to us. Therefore, if those people want it, as a political party that respects all regions, I believe that we must vote for Bill C-309.

• (1805)

[*English*]

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague, the member for Nipissing—Timiskaming, for introducing Bill C-309, An Act establishing the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Region of Northern Ontario.

I would like to thank the member for Saint Boniface for speaking for northern Ontario.

I would also like to recognize and commend the NDP member for Sault Ste. Marie for all his hard work on the development of this legislation in the past Parliament. The member for Sault Ste. Marie has been a tireless advocate for northern Ontario over the years, especially with regard to FedNor.

[*Translation*]

I would also like to congratulate the hon. member for Sault Ste. Marie on all his hard work on this legislative measure during the last parliamentary session. Our hon. colleague has for some years been a staunch advocate for northern Ontario, especially in connection with FedNor.

When I was elected several months ago, I had the great privilege of having the FedNor file assigned to me within the NDP caucus.

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[English]

When I was elected several months ago, I felt very privileged to be assigned the FedNor file within the NDP caucus. Throughout northern Ontario, people have been experiencing an epidemic rate of job losses over the past few years, and even more so within the past few months. Both of our main sectors, forestry and mining, have been hit hard during this recession. We have seen job losses at Xstrata, Vale Inco, AbitibiBowater, John Deere, CBC, Persona, and the list goes on and on. It is crucial for northern Ontario that we have a fully independent and appropriately resourced economic development agency.

[Translation]

FedNor must be able to adapt to the changing economy and ensure the economic prosperity of the workers of northern Ontario and their families. Its mandate must be drawn up at the local level by the people who live in the region, not by some faceless bureaucrat in the Ottawa offices of Industry Canada.

It is time they stopped treating the people of northern Ontario like second-class citizens. Everywhere in this country there are economic development agencies with what it takes to really encourage the local economy. There is no excuse not to have one for northern Ontario, where we face so many economic challenges.

• (1810)

[English]

We need a FedNor that can adapt to our changing economy and ensure economic prosperity for northern Ontario workers and their families. FedNor's mandate needs to be developed locally by the people of northern Ontario, not by some bureaucrat buried within Industry Canada stationed in Ottawa.

It is time to stop treating northern Ontarians like second-class citizens. There are economic development agencies throughout the country that have the capacity to make a real difference in the local economy. There is no excuse not to create one for northern Ontario, where we face so many economic challenges. During this recession, our economy needs to diversify and grow. Now is the time to encourage small business start-ups and expansions, and community economic development.

Because FedNor is underfunded, many worthy projects are turned down. The Centre for Excellence in Mining Innovation would make northern Ontario a world leader in mining resources and development. CEMI is currently researching exploration, deep mining, integrated mine process engineering, and environmental sustainability, all areas that would greatly enhance the competitiveness of the mining sector not only in northern Ontario but throughout the country.

CEMI has received funding from the Government of Ontario, Vale Inco, Xstrata, Laurentian University, the Greater City of Sudbury, and the Ontario Mineral Industry Cluster. The private sector, provincial and municipal governments have all come to the table to support the centre. Yet, FedNor has declined CEMI's application because it does not have enough funding to meet the request. This is a slap in the face for northern Ontario.

With our mining sector suffering as it is, now is the time for the federal government to pull its weight and invest in research and innovation, so that we can be ready when the economy rebounds.

[Translation]

The long-term care facility at Chelmsford, St. Joseph's Health Centre, is another FedNor reject. This facility will make 128 beds available and employ 160 full- and part-time workers. Once again, the provincial and municipal governments and the community were on board with this project, but FedNor rejected its application because it did not fit into the narrow FedNor mandate.

There is a bed shortage for patients requiring a higher level of care in Sudbury and Nickel Belt, and this institution will be a great help in alleviating that problem.

As well, the area needs good permanent jobs. Nevertheless the FedNor mandate is not flexible enough to meet some of our communities' most crying needs.

[English]

A second project that was also turned down by FedNor is the St. Joseph's long-term care facility in Chelmsford. This facility will create 128 long-term care beds and employ 160 full-time and part-time workers. Again, the provincial and municipal governments, as well as the community, have come to the table to support this facility. St. Joseph's application was turned down by FedNor because it does not meet the narrow mandate.

There is an alternative care bed shortage in Sudbury and Nickel Belt. This facility would go a long way in alleviating this crisis. There is also a need for good jobs and permanent employment. Despite this, FedNor's mandate is not flexible enough to meet some of our community's most pressing needs.

Meanwhile, projects throughout southern Ontario are receiving funding through programs administered by FedNor, while the people of northern Ontario are being left behind. Northern Ontario is a socially, geologically, ecologically and economically distinct region situated on the boreal forest of the Canadian Shield. It is home to 102 of the 134 first nations in Ontario, 43% of Ontario's aboriginal population and 27% of Ontario's francophone population. It is a treasure house of natural resources, lands and waters, provincial parks, fisheries and natural wilderness areas. If it were a province, only British Columbia and Quebec would be larger.

Northern Ontario clearly faces unique challenges, but also great opportunities. Our region deserves its own regional economic development agency.

I am urging all members of this House to support this bill through its second reading. The people of northern Ontario have been ignored by the government for far too long. With the passage of this legislation, FedNor would be able to take its rightful place as an independent, fully funded economic development agency. I think it is broke, so let us fix it.

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•(1815)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to speak to Bill C-309, in the name of my distinguished colleague from Nipissing—Timiskaming.

My colleague, the member for Nipissing—Timiskaming, is the chair of our national caucus. He is a very powerful and consistent voice for regional development in northern Ontario. He is somebody who speaks often in our caucus and in numerous meetings I have attended about the importance of investing in the regions of the country, about the importance of understanding that the regional economy of the area he represents in northern Ontario is different from some of the challenges or some of the economies, for example, in southern Ontario, which is also suffering in this very difficult Conservative recession.

Our colleague, when he introduced the bill, made a very compelling case why FedNor should in fact have its separate legal status and a statute creating an agency of the Government of Canada and not simply a program buried at the Department of Industry.

I come from Atlantic Canada. The Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, ACOA, as my colleague from northern Ontario noted, has a separate statute. It is created by an act of Parliament with a mandate. It is set up under federal law to operate as an agency of the Government of Canada. It is not subject to an administrative committee or a bureaucratic decision at some third level buried at the Department of Industry.

I do not know why economic development in northern Ontario would take a second-class position to the importance of investing in regional development in Atlantic Canada, in western Canada, with the economic diversification initiative, or in the Quebec regions with Développement économique Canada pour les régions du Québec.

[*Translation*]

As my colleague pointed out earlier, the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec operates at arm's length from the government.

I think it would be a good idea to have a minister in Parliament who can appear before parliamentary committees, a minister responsible for credits and for protecting the interests of northern Ontario.

[*English*]

We are left to ask ourselves why the Conservative government is going to oppose the bill. Why are the Conservatives going to resist putting regional development in northern Ontario on the same footing as it is in other regions of the country? Why did they create an agency for economic development in southern Ontario? As I said a minute ago, that region is suffering serious economic distress as a result of the global economic recession and the inability of the Conservative government to face head on the economic challenges facing every region of the country.

Is there an agenda in the Conservative government to abandon northern Ontario? Are the Conservatives leaving it as a program at the Department of Industry instead of a separate agency of the government created by statute? Did someone at some meeting on a Monday morning or a Friday afternoon at the Department of

Industry on Queen Street here in Ottawa decide that another program in the department was short of money so they would get a bit from FedNor?

It is horribly unfair to leave the economic future of the communities represented by my colleague from Nipissing—Timiskaming and other members of the House from northern Ontario so vulnerable in the face of competing budget priorities and in the face of what I believe is a complete disinterest on the part of the Conservative government in regional development.

As I said a moment ago, I represent a riding in rural New Brunswick where regional development is essential not only for the economic future of the community, but also for municipalities to have access to an infrastructure program that meets the unique needs of smaller municipalities and some remote and regional communities.

One of the more compelling arguments for economic development that I have ever heard, and for the idea that the Government of Canada has to be involved in regional development, came from the late Harrison McCain. Mr. McCain was a great New Brunswick entrepreneur who began the McCain Foods global enterprise which operates in dozens of countries around the world.

McCain Foods began as an idea to process potatoes in a village called Florenceville, New Brunswick. In the 1970s, when the two McCain brothers, the late Harrison McCain and Wallace McCain, decided to open McCain Foods, they could not find a commercial lending institution that would give two entrepreneurs from rural New Brunswick the millions of dollars they needed to set up their first french fry production facility.

The department of regional industrial expansion existed at that time in the Trudeau government. That was the federal economic development agency which decided to partner with McCain Foods in rural New Brunswick. I have heard Harrison McCain tell the story himself about the interest of the Government of Canada in helping people in the small village of Florenceville. Florenceville probably has a population of less than a few thousand. It is an hour and a half drive from the city of Fredericton, along the Saint John River Valley in New Brunswick, known as the potato belt because it is a very fertile area for growing potatoes. If the Government of Canada had not stood by the McCain brothers in the 1970s, we would not have a globally competitive business called McCain Foods operating in almost every continent called.

When we think of what the importance of a small investment meant at that time to the future economic prosperity of a company as important, I would argue, to Canada and to our export picture as a food-producing country as McCain Foods, then we have not understood the importance of the federal role in regional development.

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That brings me back to my colleague's bill, Bill C-309, which seeks simply to give FedNor the same status as the other economic development agencies. It does not seek, as some Conservative members would assert, to increase the budget or duplicate administrative costs, or set up a corporate service branch that does not exist now. As my colleague accurately described, these services currently exist within the program operated as FedNor. What does not exist is the legal status of an agency with a mandate from this Parliament to operate in the interests of the economic development of a region as important to our country as is northern Ontario.

• (1820)

Consider the difficulties in the forestry sector, for example. My colleague from Nipissing—Timiskaming has spoken many times about the challenge the American subsidies around black liquor represent for the Canadian pulp and paper industry. It is a very critical time for this industry. Thousands of jobs have already been lost. Tens of thousands of jobs are threatened. The government needs to get engaged in the fight to support these industries, workers and communities.

If we do not have a separate agency like FedNor, which can understand the economic challenges of the forestry or mining sectors in the economy of northern Ontario, and we simply rely on the Department of Industry on Queen Street in Ottawa to be interested in the difficulties of operating a sawmill in a small remote community of northern Ontario where there is the challenge of building logging roads across a vast expanse of territory, then we have not understood the importance of building a truly national economy.

If the Conservative government were sincere about wanting every region of the country to prosper, it would stand up for FedNor. It would not bury it in some office at the Department of Industry in Ottawa. It would give it a legal status similar to ACOA, which is an agency that is so important to my region in Atlantic Canada, or to DEC, Développement économique Canada pour les régions du Québec. It would support Bill C-309, which I think is a great testimony to the commitment of my colleague from Nipissing—Timiskaming to northern Ontario.

• (1825)

Mr. Rick Dykstra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to and discuss the implications of private member's Bill C-309.

The bill proposes, at a significant cost to the taxpayer, to create a new federal agency with its own deputy minister and with its own bureaucracy to administer economic development programs exclusively to northern Ontario. Bill C-309, in essence, aims to create an agency to do what FedNor, a program administered by Industry Canada, is already doing and doing quite well.

Communities and rural areas in northern Ontario continue to face challenges that affect the stability and the development of their economy, both in the short and in the long term. Some of these challenges include: geographic isolation from large urban markets to the south; limited telecommunications and transportation infrastructure; static or declining population; a high youth out-migration rate; lower than average employment growth; and limited ability and capacity to respond to the current global economic slowdown.

This great part of our country certainly deserves the support of Canada's government, and I am proud to say that FedNor has been leading the way for years.

Since its inception in 1987, FedNor has been operating successfully within Industry Canada. On a daily basis, FedNor staff work with a diverse client base in an effort to build a stronger and more prosperous northern Ontario. These clients include business leaders and professional groups in the areas of tourism, transportation, telecommunications, resource industries, small business, health research and education.

It appears that the intention of my hon. colleague, the member for Nipissing—Timiskaming in tabling this bill is to ensure that the government will provide the support that northern Ontario needs to continue to thrive. Today, FedNor is providing this support and it is doing so quite successfully, I might add.

To understand the implications of the bill, we need to turn the clock back just a bit.

In 1987 the federal economic development initiative for northern Ontario, FedNor, was created to serve the economic development needs of the northern part of this province. It was established as a program within Industry Canada, within its regional operations sector, where it still remains today.

It was in 1995, some eight years later, when Industry Canada, through FedNor, became responsible for administering the community futures program across rural Ontario.

In other regions, the community futures program is administered by the three existing regional development agencies in Canada: the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, the Western Economic Diversification and the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec.

What makes the community futures program unique is that each community futures organization counts on the expertise of volunteer boards made up of local residents who bring a variety of expertise to the table.

The community futures program builds on the philosophy that local residents are best positioned to make decisions about the future of their communities. The program has become a driving force for business and for community development across the province of Ontario.

We move some seven years later to 2004 when FedNor took on the responsibility of administering the new eastern Ontario development program. The success of this program can, in part, be attributed to the excellent administration and flexible management structure from which FedNor currently benefits by being part of Industry Canada.

In addition to the responsibilities I have mentioned, FedNor also administers funding for the economic development of official language minority communities in Ontario. This has involved coordinating consultations with our official language minority communities to identify gaps and to identify needs.

FedNor has taken a lead role in promoting the vitality of these communities by working with its community futures partners to bring about service improvements. These efforts are helping to ensure that the community futures development corporations have the support they need to meet the official language needs of their communities.

In the past, FedNor has administered other initiatives in Ontario, on behalf of the Government of Canada, such as the softwood industry community economic adjustment initiative.

• (1830)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I must interrupt the member. When the House returns to this matter, he will have five minutes remaining.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[English]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I asked a question in the House and the answer really did not address the question at all.

One of the key comments I made was that the Minister of Public Safety was strong on spin, but weak on crime. Now what I need to add is he and his government are tough on police. That is an unfortunate reality of the decisions and the policies of the Conservative government.

Is it not enough that the government has broken its promise to put 2,500 more police on the street? I had a visit from representatives of the police and RCMP. They advised me that the funding, which would not have covered 2,500 police in either case, was not tied to any additional police being hired. Therefore, the funding the Conservative government claimed was for more police, had no accountability that it would actually deliver more police. I could not get any clarity as to whether one additional police officer or RCMP officer had been hired, based on the promise made by the government. That is simply not good enough. We know how critical police are to apprehending criminals and also to preventing crime, an important objective. This is another broken promise.

Second, the approach of the Conservative government to strangle the gun registry is completely not supported by evidence. It is not supported by members of the public. It is not supported by the Association of Chiefs of Police. Police officers use this gun registry 9,000 times a day. More than 5,000 affidavits have been provided by the Canadian Firearms Registry to support the prosecution of firearms related crime and court proceedings.

Having a gun registry, according to the police, is a matter of personal safety for their officers. If a policeman is entering a residence in a building and does not have access to an up-to-date

accurate registry to find out whether he or she can expect that he or she will face a gun, that police officer's safety is compromised.

Guns used in tragedies, like the rampage through the École Polytechnique de Montréal in which 14 women lost their lives, would have been registered by the long gun registry.

Finally, the government is opposing the rights of police officers, and that is enough to make me shake my head. The government rolled back its promise on the wages for RCMP officers, would have brought them to a level that was at parity with other police officers in Canada. Now the government is opposing collective bargaining rights for their front line officers, whose lives are at risk on a daily basis through their activities.

I would appeal to the government. Yes, strong laws for those who are guilty of series crimes is important, and the Liberals support that. However, we need strong prevention measures, including supporting our police forces and RCMP, rather than being tough on police.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise to respond to the question put to the House by the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra regarding the issue of escalating gang violence in British Columbia, at least that is what it was supposed to be, but she certainly rambled around a whole bunch of issues. I will focus my answer on gang violence in British Columbia.

The government is committed to giving the streets of our cities back to law-abiding citizens. We believe community safety is a defining value, indeed, a fundamental right in Canadian society. The government is taking concrete action on all fronts and is implementing a balanced approach to reducing crime.

We are providing the law enforcement community with the tools it needs to combat crime, and we have recently introduced new crime bills to this effect. We are ensuring there is more police presence in our streets, through increased investments in the RCMP in support of hiring of over 1,000 new RCMP police and civilian staff and through our \$400 million police officer fund that supports provinces and municipalities to recruit 2,500 additional officers. We are also supporting effective crime prevention measures that will help communities and families keep youth away from lives of drugs and crime.

We are taking a two-pronged approach, holding accountable before the law those who commit crimes, while helping those who may be at risk before they turn to a life of crime.

In this respect, we have renewed the national crime prevention strategy in 2008, effectively doubling the permanent funding for the strategy. This will lead to more stability and predictability in crime prevention efforts across Canada.

The hon. member of Parliament would be interested to know that the National Crime Prevention Centre is currently funding more than 20 community-based projects in the province of British Columbia, which are designed to steer vulnerable children and youth away from crime. Two of these projects, worth \$2.1 million, are funded through the youth gang prevention program to specifically address the issue of gangs by preventing youths from joining gangs in the first place. These multi-year investments will deliver concrete results to British Columbia communities.

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Effective crime prevention measures cannot be implemented without the active support of local communities, the voluntary sector, parents, and schools. We are therefore working very closely with them to ensure they have access to the most up-to-date information on what works to prevent crime, especially among children and youth who are most vulnerable to negative influence because of their personal lives and circumstances. Furthermore, we are working very closely with provincial governments to ensure the prevention measures that are developed also respond to their priorities.

The effective responses to crime and insecurity require a coordinated approach that brings together all partners and orders of government in a focused effort to combat violence. That is the approach this government is taking.

Allow me to underscore the point that our efforts to refocus the national crime prevention strategy were designed to maximize its benefits and effects. This is why the strategy now provides support to communities to implement interventions that are based on the best available evidence and target those most in need.

The youth gang prevention fund helps fund community groups that work with troubled youth to prevent them from becoming involved in gang violence by targeting specific risk factors associated with youth gang activity and youth at the highest risk of gang involvement.

• (1835)

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to ask the hon. member opposite, who was laughing along with his colleagues while I was speaking, whether he was laughing about the idea of a police officer entering a home and not having information about whether there was a dangerous weapon, or the tragedy at École Polytechnique where 14 young women lost their lives, or at the idea that the RCMP may wish pay parity and that the pay promise be respected by the Conservative government.

Instead, we heard a laundry list of motherhood statements and generalities. I would like know this. What happened to the skills link program, where 550 spaces in the greater Vancouver area have gone down to 110 spaces for the very youth who are most at risk, those who do not graduate from high school and need that program to help get them into the workforce?

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Mr. Speaker, through the safer communities strategy, our government is implementing a basket of measures that are both tough and effective on crime. They foster enhanced enforcement, sentencing corrections and prevention efforts.

The refocused approach of crime prevention invests in supporting initiatives that are now more focused on those most at risk of offending, including youth at risk of joining gangs. Our goal is to discourage young people from joining gangs and to help those already involved in gangs to get out and get on the right path.

Let me just finish by suggesting the hon. member make herself far more informed of the allegations she makes. On this side of the House, there happens to be four members who were police officers, who would be happy to speak to the member at any time to explain some of these things. With all due respect, I do not want to get into

any disagreement with the member, but it is important she knows what the important issues are to the House and to Canadians.

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on March 31 I had the opportunity to ask a question of the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development. She equally had the opportunity to answer it, but she unfortunately decided to sidestep the question. I welcome this second opportunity and I hope the government does as well.

I want to delve into some of the problems that are faced by people in my riding with respect to employment insurance. In fact, they face two devastating effects of the global economic crisis: its effect on the manufacturing sector in Ontario and on the employment insurance program that systematically discriminates against Ontario residents.

Very specifically, I questioned the minister about a constituent of mine in Don Valley West who had lost her learning-while-working internship program because the program was cut due to the economic crisis we are in. This young woman had worked 724 hours before losing her position. However, because of the outdated regulations governing EI, this young woman was not eligible to receive benefits. Consequently, she has no way to feed her family, pay her rent or survive. However, if she had lived in many other parts of the country, she would have had the requisite hours. She would have qualified and would have collected benefits. This is simply wrong. It is simply not fair.

The current EI system in Canada leaves 60% of unemployed Canadians out in the cold. Think about that. Six out of every 10 Canadians who find themselves unemployed do not qualify for benefits. Something is wrong with this picture. The minister provided and continues to provide unsatisfactory responses when questioned about EI. On her watch, unemployment has continued to rise. All the while, EI has become more and more difficult to collect.

On May 8 it was announced that the unemployment rate is now at 8%, the highest level in seven years. Since October 2008, 321,000 additional Canadians have lost their jobs. Yet, the government is unwilling to revisit the EI program, even though its own constituents must be telling it the same thing. The very nature of unemployment and employment in the economy has changed, so the way that EI works has to change as well. EI needs to be responsive to the situation and it needs to be responsive to people.

We need an EI system that changes with the realities of the economy and the needs of Canadians. If the government were to do something now, perhaps it would save us all from being in a worse situation. If it were to address the EI problem right now, we might all avoid the huge unemployment numbers that Canadians found themselves in the last time the Conservatives were in power. The Liberals had to come to the rescue in 1993.

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I remind the House that when the Conservatives left office in 1993, they left an unemployment rate of 11.2%. After 13 years of sound Liberal management, we left a 6.6% unemployment rate. That is what they inherited and they squandered it. They have squandered many things, but they have squandered people's lives and jobs. EI is the best economic stimulus we have to keep the economy going. It is money that gets spent.

Of course, I am supportive of shovel ready infrastructure projects to stimulate the economy. However, my constituents, as individuals, are also shovel ready. They want to work and there is no work for them. They want to keep food on the table and rent paid. EI is money that goes into the economy, helps people keep jobs, and staves off higher unemployment rates. The government should not be afraid of change. It should not be afraid of fairness or equality. It should not be afraid of intelligence or compassion.

The government needs to make the EI system responsive to the economy, which has changed.

● (1840)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have to say at the outset that I always find it amusing whenever a Liberal gets up and starts talking about all the problems within the EI system because, as we know and I think most Canadians know, we inherited the current EI system from the Liberal government. As a matter of fact, when the Liberals first set up this program in 1996, unemployment rates were higher than they are now.

So, what did we do? We took the basic shell, the basic premise of the program, and we made distinct and significant improvements. Prior to this year's budget, we held widespread consultations across Canada, talking to stakeholders, seeing what they would like to have in an EI program.

What did they tell us? First, they said, without question, they would like to see extended benefits at the tail end of the benefit period. We did that. We extended the benefit period by five weeks.

Second, they said they would like to see more money put into skills upgrading and job training for those people who are unfortunate enough to lose their jobs. We did that. We spent billions of dollars, not only for those people who qualify for EI but we spent over \$500 million for skills upgrading programs for those people who did not qualify for EI to begin with.

Last, we extended the work share program by 14 weeks. The result of that is that close to 100,000 Canadians have kept their jobs because of that initiative.

I think the other thing we have to examine here is the significant improvements we made to the EI program. As a once very worthy political mentor of mine said, "Don't compare us against perfection. Compare us against the alternative".

What I would point out is what the Liberal Party is advocating with respect to EI. It is advocating, as is the NDP, that there be a threshold of 360 hours. Three hundred and sixty hours, and then someone would be able to start collecting EI. Some people might find that to be attractive. However, that is an absolute disaster waiting to happen. It is fiscally irresponsible. What that means, if we

break it down, is that anyone who works for 45 days, at 8 hours a day, can qualify for EI. The Liberal Party, quite frankly, does not even know how long those benefits might extend to. It could extend for up to a year.

I think anyone who suggests for a moment that a worker who works for 45 days and then goes on EI for up to a year, who thinks that is a legitimate and fiscally responsible program for Canadians, does not know what they are talking about.

What that means is that employers and employees will have to start paying more money. It is called a payroll tax. Someone has to pay for that. It is just one more tax that the Liberals are advocating.

We know that the leader of the Liberal Party has said he would have to raise taxes to pay for the deficit. He has not told us yet exactly what taxes he would raise and who would pay them. We are starting now to get a glimpse of his plan. This is the first step in the Liberals' raising taxes regime. I expect there will be more to come. However, this is something that no Canadian should stand for. It is, pure and simple, the wrong approach. We do not raise taxes during a recession. That is the Liberal approach and it is the wrong approach.

● (1845)

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Mr. Speaker, the very last thing we need to do on this side of the House is take any economic lessons from that side of the House. This is the natural opposing party that simply refuses to govern.

Forty months ago, you inherited a government that was sound. You cut taxes at the wrong time. You left the cupboard bare and you have risked the lives of Canadian citizens daily. You do not know what government is about. You do not know what people's lives are about. You have forgotten what it is to be—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I would like to remind the hon. member that he ought to address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Through you, Mr. Speaker, maybe the Conservatives will get the message. Because the reality is they have forgotten that they are government. Anything that they have done to change EI has been done begrudgingly because we have suggested it. Anything that is about caring for people and providing a social safety net is because we have suggested it. They do not understand the basic economics. Because if 420 hours is good for part of the country, it is good for all of the country. Are the Conservatives now going to cut the number of hours that everybody needs?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I think that if anybody wants to take lessons from the Liberals on the economy, they are living in Technicolor, they are living in dreamland. There is a reason, I would point out to my hon. colleague from Don Valley West, that Canadians chose us in the last election.

Adjournment Proceedings

I might also add that the Liberal Party, based on its sound economic policy and its sound fiscal record over the 13 years, ended up with 77 seats and 26% of the vote; the lowest vote total the Liberals have had in a generation.

Canadians voted for a Conservative government in the last election, not in spite of the recession but because of it. They know that a Conservative government is the only government that can deal with these tough economic problems we are facing today. And the same will happen again whenever the opposition decides to screw up its courage to force the next election.

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to continue on with some questioning. A number of weeks have passed since I asked the question about extending EI benefits to those who were prevented from fishing because of ice conditions. When the question was asked on April 22, the minister said that she understood what was happening with the ice conditions. She said that the employment of fishers was very important. She said, "We are looking after these individuals, and we will be addressing that situation very soon". It sounded promising.

Under some further questioning, as we got further into it, she said she had been working with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans on this very issue. At committee, just two days ago, the deputy minister of fisheries and oceans was asked if there were discussions between HRDC and Fisheries and Oceans. She said that there had been no discussions. There was not a problem with ice on the northeast coast of Newfoundland and Labrador.

At our fisheries committee today, we had Earle McCurdy, a representative from the FFAW. We asked him about the ice conditions on the northeast coast of Newfoundland. Mr. McCurdy said he had received hundreds of emails and calls. There were harbours on the northeast coast that were blocked in by ice and there was still nothing forthcoming. The only solution that her department was going to have was that we should wait and wait. Eventually, the ice will melt and move off and we will not have to deal with it.

Let us ask the parliamentary secretary specific questions. Were there discussions? Why was due process not given to ice compensation? Now, he might go on and talk about extending the five extra weeks on employment insurance, because that is what the government did. I have some questions on that, too. The fact of the matter is that most of the clients were already getting the five extra weeks that the government said it was generously giving. There are 58 regions in the country. Thirty-six of those regions were already getting the five weeks, so we are only talking about less than 20 regions that were going to get the extra five weeks.

When the parliamentary secretary talks about the extra weeks, my second question is this. When this was announced in January, my sources tell me that this was only going to impact the 325,000 people who were on EI, which represents less than 25% of the total client base. Could he confirm these numbers and tell us exactly how many people were going to benefit from this initiative that they were already going to get anyway? There were already 10% unemployment levels in many regions of the country and there was more to come.

It was going to happen anyway, but the government likes to say that the extra five weeks was a great thing and that it is doing a lot for EI. The fact of the matter is that it was going to happen anyway. Will the parliamentary secretary answer those two specific questions on employment insurance benefits?

● (1850)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, since the hon. member for Avalon is relatively new to the House, I may need to repeat myself since he did not seem to hear the answers I gave to his colleague's questions a few moments ago.

I am sorry I need to deal with this the odd time when I deal with members from the Liberal Party but since they are Liberals, I will try to speak slowly and distinctly so I can get the message across.

We inherited the existing EI program from the Liberal Party. Any time I hear the Liberals complaining about the provisions contained in the EI program, it was their program to begin with. If what the hon. member for Avalon said is true, why did his own party not address those very fundamental issues when it had 13 years to do it? It made no progress whatsoever.

When we took office prior to the 2008 election, we held widespread consultations with Canadians from coast to coast to coast looking for ways to improve on the EI system. We knew at that time that Canada and the rest of the world were facing a global economic crisis, a recession, a slowdown, the likes of which we had never seen before. We recognized that we needed to make some significant changes to the EI program to deal with the problems facing the country. What did we do? We started a consultation process.

Again, if we were to contrast that to what the Liberals would do, they would bring in programs without any consultation with stakeholders. That is not the approach the Conservative Party and our government takes.

What we heard during those consultations were three very basic elements. The first thing we heard was that we should extend the benefit period from 45 weeks to a longer period. During consultations, some of the opposition members suggested that we extend it by two weeks but we did more than double that. We extended the EI benefit period by 5 weeks, from 45 to 50 weeks.

The second thing we heard during consultations was that we needed to put more money into skills upgrading and job training. For those unfortunate souls who have lost their job and need to retrain, we decided to add \$1.5 billion to increase job training and skills upgrading programs already in existence. That means that over \$1 billion in new money is available for those people on EI to upgrade their skills and perhaps find a new craft so they can get back into the workplace as quickly as possible. Not only did we put \$1 billion into the EI fund for training, we allocated \$500 million for those people who did not qualify for EI so they could receive job training and skills upgrading.

Finally, we heard that we needed to do something about our job share program so we did. This program has allowed over 100,000 people to retain their jobs and the employers to keep employing these people. We extended the work share program by 14 weeks to 52 weeks.

Those are just a few of the improvements we made to the existing program, one that we inherited from the Liberals.

I would suggest to the hon. member for Avalon to please not complain about the program that his party developed and we improved upon.

• (1855)

Mr. Scott Andrews: Madam Speaker, I may be new to the House but I thought we would get some answers today. However, he did not once mention why we are here today, which is ice compensation. Therefore, I will take from his response that we were right, that there have been no discussions between the two departments on ice compensation and that nothing will be done for the fishers on the northeast coast of Newfoundland and Labrador.

I would remind my hon. colleague that it was a Liberal government that started the pilot project prior to the Conservatives forming government. They can pat themselves on the back all they want about extending the five weeks, but the Liberal Party started this pilot project long before they got their hands on it. The only thing the Conservatives have done is driven unemployment up to 10%, which means that everybody in the country can get a piece of the pilot project because they are unemployed.

I will again ask the hon. member a specific question regarding ice compensation. Did the two departments talk? Why did the minister mislead the House by saying “We will be addressing the situation very soon”?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Madam Speaker, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans is engaged in consultations on a daily basis with Canadians from coast to coast. She has obviously taken the situation on the Atlantic coast very seriously. She is an Atlantic Canadian herself, as all of us know, and she has engaged in consultations with stakeholders.

I would suggest that rather than complaining, the hon. member for Avalon should be working with the government as we try to come to the best compensation and resolution to this very difficult problem.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Denise Savoie): Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been withdrawn and the House will now resolve itself into committee of the whole to study all votes under Agriculture and Agri-Food in the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2010.

I do now leave the chair for the House to resolve itself in committee of the whole.

Business of Supply

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

• (1900)

[*English*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD—MAIN ESTIMATES, 2009-10

(Consideration in committee of the whole of all votes under Agriculture and Agri-Food in the main estimates, Ms. Denise Savoie in the chair)

The Deputy Chair: I would like to open this session of committee of the whole by making a short statement on this evening's proceedings.

Tonight's debate is being held under Standing Order 81(4), which provides for each of two sets of estimates selected by the Leader of the Opposition to be considered in committee of the whole for up to four hours. The debate is also held under the motion adopted by unanimous consent yesterday.

Tonight's debate is a general one on all the votes under Agriculture and Agri-Food. Each member will be allocated 15 minutes. The first round will begin with the official opposition, followed by the government, the Bloc Québécois and the New Democratic Party. After that, we will follow the usual proportional rotation.

As provided in the motion adopted yesterday, parties may use each 15 minute slot for speeches or questions and answers by one or more of their members. In the case of speeches, members of the party to which the period is allotted may speak one after the other. The Chair would appreciate it if the first member speaking in each slot would indicate how the time will be used, particularly if it is to be shared.

[*Translation*]

When the time is to be used for questions and answers, the Chair will expect that the minister's response will reflect approximately the time taken by the question, since this time will be counted in the time originally allotted to the party.

Though members may speak more than once, the Chair will generally try to ensure that all members wishing to speak are heard before inviting members to speak again, while respecting the proportional party rotations for speakers. Members need not be in their own seats to be recognized.

[*English*]

I would remind all hon. members that, according to yesterday's motion, during this evening's debate no quorum calls, dilatory motions or requests for unanimous consent shall be entertained.

As your Chair, I shall be guided by the rules of the committee of the whole and by the motion adopted yesterday. However, in the interest of a full exchange, I am prepared to exercise discretion and flexibility in the application of these rules.

Business of Supply

It is important that the traditions of the House in relation to decorum be respected and that members make their remarks and pose their questions in a judicious fashion. The Chair will expect all hon. members to focus on the subject matter of the debate, the main estimates of the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food.

I also wish to indicate that in committee of the whole, ministers and members should be referred to by their title or riding name and all remarks should be addressed through the Chair. I ask for everyone's co-operation in upholding all established standards of decorum, parliamentary language and behaviour.

At the conclusion of tonight's debate, the committee will rise, the estimates under Agriculture and Agri-Food will be deemed reported and the House will adjourn immediately until tomorrow.

[*Translation*]

We may now begin tonight's session.

The House in committee of the whole pursuant to Standing Order 81(4)(a), the first appointed day, consideration in committee of the whole of all votes under Agriculture and Agri-Food in the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2010.

• (1905)

[*English*]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Madam Chair, I will be sharing my time with the members for Kings—Hants and Willowdale.

Sadly, one area in which the minister has been very successful is increasing the farmers' burden of debt. Could the minister state the current level of farm debt in Canada and tell the House how much that farm debt has increased nationally since the Prime Minister came to office in 2006?

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Madam Chair, that is certainly an interesting question from the member opposite but that is more a function of Statistics Canada than agriculture.

I can assure the member opposite that we do keep track of those numbers. I can get him those at some point. I know we have them here.

However, I would make the point that there is debt and then there is good debt. We have put forward a program in the last few days. We are trying to re-jig the Farm Improvement and Marketing Cooperatives Loans Act to ensure that a fresh \$1 billion gets out there to beginning farmers, to new farmers—

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Madam Chair, on a point of order.

The Deputy Chair: It was understood that there would be no calls for points of order in this evening's session but I do take the point.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Madam Chair, I will answer the question for the minister. The debt load is \$55 billion and it has increased \$4.1 billion since the government came to power, four times the amount of debt as the U.S. farmers.

What about increasing farmers' financial well-being. On December 21, 2005, the Prime Minister promised a cost of production for farmers. He committed \$100 million per year.

This is an easy question. How much money has been spent under the cost of production program by the government?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the big point to remember here is that the debt to asset ratio in Canada is up less than 1%. Three-quarters of 1% is what debt to asset ratio is up.

Land values for agriculture across this country are up on average some 6%. This is good news. The member opposite wants to take the downside of what is happening. He talks about the cost of production program but he knows full well that program will not and cannot trigger. A good example, of course, is the situation in Ontario where they have RMP. They have been able to push out less than \$2 million in the same timeframe.

What we have done is reinvigorate the new suite of programs to include the cost of production program.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Madam Chair, the fact is that the Prime Minister broke his promise. What was put out was zero and the program was cancelled. Another broken promise. More debt for farmers and less income for producers.

Under the government's watch, the hog industry today is fighting for its very survival. The minister said that he would be there for them but all he has managed to do with his program is increase, as is usual, more debt.

The Canada Pork Council made a request to him this week for an immediate payment of \$1 billion. It is critical that these moneys be provided for the survival of the hog industry. Is the minister willing to commit tonight to that \$1 billion or will it be another broken commitment?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, it is hard to break a commitment that has not been made yet. I am not sure where the member for Malpeque is coming from.

The hog sector has been served very well by this government. Of course it is very cyclical in nature. We did come forward with a cull sow program. It has worked very well. We have been able to expedite those moneys out. Of course we got new markets open for pork.

We are heading south again this coming week to Colombia and we are taking along Canadian Pork International to take advantage of a growing marketplace down there. We have expedited moneys under the targeted advance, under our new programs. We are able to do that, unlike the old APF that his government brought forward. We also put out some \$80 million to help the industry address the cyclical nature of disease within hogs.

I think the pork industry has been very well served. We will continue to work with the industry toward brighter days.

The Deputy Chair: I would just urge the member for Guelph that we did talk about using flexibility. I would just remind all members that we will respect the rules. I would like to ask the members to use a certain flexibility.

Business of Supply

Hon. Wayne Easter: Madam Chair, with respect to the Prime Minister's attempt to cover up a ministerial responsibility during the listeriosis crisis, on April 30, 225 days after the "let's pretend" investigation started, the minister admitted that he had not been interviewed. It is now 14 days later and, as key minister responsible for food safety, has he been interviewed yet?

• (1910)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I am not sure why the member opposite wants to predetermine the outcome of an independent investigation. Of course, everyone agrees that she has the tools and the expertise to get the job done.

We do not do these types of things in public. That is what the report will be all about and it will be public.

Certainly I have had discussions with Ms. Weatherill, and I intend to have more if she so determines.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Madam Chair, is supply management on the table for the Canada-EU free trade agreement negotiations, yes or no?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, absolutely not.

Hon. Scott Brison: Madam Chair, will the minister commit absolutely to defending supply management in the FTA negotiations with the EU?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I am proud of our stance, and our actions speak a lot longer and harder than the words from over there. We put in place article XXVIII. We put in place cheese compositional standards. We put in place special safeguards, something that they always talked about but never got the job done for supply management. We continue to do that and we are proud to.

Hon. Scott Brison: Madam Chair, the Atlantic Food and Horticultural Research Station in Kentville, Nova Scotia is vital to Atlantic Canada's food and horticultural industry. The Conservative government is quietly gutting the centre's capacity through attrition and cutting operational funds. The centre's employees, in fact, as they leave or retire, are not being replaced.

Modern agriculture needs modern science. Will the minister commit to the long-term viability of the centre and to restore all of its operational funding so that the centre can continue to meet the important needs of Atlantic Canada's horticultural community?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I am not sure where the member opposite is getting his information. There have been no cuts to these centres; in fact, we are rejuvenating them. We are putting a lot more money back into science and technology, back through the centres that the Liberals ignored for almost 13 years. Certainly they are in a terrible state of disrepair. That is why I made announcements in P.E.I., and across the country there were announcements made, about rebuilding the capacity of these great icons of agriculture.

Hon. Scott Brison: Madam Chair, Canadians understand the need to preserve prime agricultural land, but in Canada, the cost of preserving these lands is being assumed only by our farmers, particularly when farmers have to forgo profits by not selling their land to developers.

What is the role for the federal government to protect agricultural lands, possibly through land banking?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the member opposite should know that we have a little thing in this country. It is Confederation. The provinces are certainly the member of record for those types of initiatives. If the member has something he would like Nova Scotia to put forward, I would say he should take it up with whatever government wins that election.

Hon. Scott Brison: Madam Chair, what is pretty obvious is that Canadians are going to need a new federal government to get anything done to strengthen Canadian agriculture.

In terms of country of origin labelling, the U.S. has implemented new rules that are hurting Canadian livestock farmers. Canadian beef and hog farmers are getting lower and lower prices. They cannot compete with these unfair trade rules.

Why has the government continually failed to defend our farmers and stand up to the U.S. government in order to secure changes to protect Canadian farmers against the pernicious effects of country of origin labelling?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, we have done just exactly that with a beginning challenge, which got us the rule we wanted. We are into a second challenge now on this voluntary aspect, and I am sure if the Liberals had won a fifth term, they would have been there too.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay (Willowdale, Lib.): Madam Chair, in 2007, the Prime Minister announced AgriInvest, a new savings program to help farmers manage business risks. The Prime Minister touted this initiative at the time as "programming that is more predictable, bankable and better enables farmers to better respond to rising costs". However, two years later, it has still not been implemented. Why is this another broken promise?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, it is no such thing. We are working with the banks to put those depository situations in place. We will have that done sometime over the summer. In the meantime, we have taken care of producers by backstopping them and making sure they did not have to commit, but we have certainly flowed those funds for them, some \$600 million to date.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Madam Chair, I did not actually get an answer to the question. This is a program that was announced two years ago and has not been implemented, another broken promise.

I would also like to ask about another broken promise. In the current budget, budget 2009, the government promised a \$50 million so-called investment for additional livestock slaughter capacity. The minister convinced the farmers that this would be grant money to build capacity, but only two months later it shifted from a contribution to a loan. I will clarify that a loan does not qualify as an investment. This is another broken promise. Can the minister explain why?

Business of Supply

●(1915)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the member opposite probably forgot that \$600 million has flowed out through AgriInvest. Of course, we continue to do that job and look forward to flowing more.

As to the slaughter capacity, that was always a loan. It was always explained that way. But it is a great situation in that the repayment terms are more than generous. Nothing is repaid until borrowers are into a sustainable profit margin situation. That is a tremendous investment. We have had almost 100 applications already. So I would think that processors and producers out there get it, even though the Liberals do not.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Madam Chair, Canadian farmers are in debt four times as much as American farmers. The idea of advertising an investment as a grant and now saying that the repayment terms are generous is a little hard to swallow for the farmers in this country who are up to their eyeballs in debt.

I will ask the minister again, why was it advertised as an investment on the basis of it being a grant? Regardless of the repayment terms now, how can he justify that it is now a loan?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, it always was. Of course, people like to speculate, but we were never shy about saying this is money that will be used to stimulate, to leverage and make things happen.

The great news in this country is that producers are in good shape. As I said, the debt-to-asset ratio has only risen by three-quarters of 1%. Farm Credit assures me that less than one-third of 1% of its total portfolio is considered at risk. That is good news. I wish Liberals would get on board with it.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: My colleague asked a question earlier, Madam Chair, about the hog producers, and the response from the minister was that the hog producers in this country are very well served by the government.

I would point out that the minister made a lovely show of serving pork at the barbecue in support of the producers a little while ago, but I would ask the minister to look me in the eye right now and tell me which one of those many producers actually told the minister that the industry is being well served by the current government.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I hear that constantly. There is a large pork sector in my riding, and of course, Jurgen Preugschas, the president of the hog sector, is a good friend of mine. We have worked together over the years.

I would certainly be happy to share those stories with the member opposite, but of course, I am going to be timed out so I cannot.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Madam Chair, we must have been speaking with a very different group of hog producers, because at that function, I had many conversations with hog producer after hog producer about cost of production challenges and country of origin labelling challenges. Every single hog producer I spoke with that day said that the industry is in very difficult straits.

So I would ask the minister again if he can suggest in what specific ways the hog industry is being well served by the government.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, if the member opposite checked with all the hog farmers in her riding—oh, that is right, there are

none—I think she would come to the realization that pork production is very cyclical. It always is and always will be. Certainly there are ups and downs.

We have been trying to develop programming and I think we have done that. We continue to work with our provincial colleagues in the industry itself to develop and deliver programs that get to the farm gate, not big announcements of money as we used to see under APF, but actual targeted funding that served them well.

Overall, that is the message I am getting back from my hog producers, and Canadian hog producers.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Madam Chair, the fact of the matter is that program payments under the government are much less. They were \$4.9 billion in 2005, and substantially less than that in the last budget.

Would the minister look at his figures, be honest with us and tell us what the total program payments for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada were in the current year and what is proposed for next year?

The government goes on with the line, all the time, that it is there for farmers. It is not there for farmers. It has been paying out less money, there are fewer program dollars, and all it has been successful at doing is putting farmers into debt.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: I cannot begin to tell all the good stuff we are doing, Madam Chair, but certainly the member opposite knows full well. He has actually told farmers in Prince Edward Island that we are doing a good job.

Certainly it is not reflected by the numbers. As I said, agriculture is cyclical. Luckily, grains and oilseeds have been doing extremely well. We will continue to flow moneys, and of course, they are always in the best interests of farmers.

●(1920)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Agriculture.

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Madam Chair, it is a pleasure to be here. It is always exciting to discuss agriculture in this great place.

I know the team around me is very well prepared. They have been serving agriculture and serving the farm gate to the best of their ability. We are blessed to have a great department. I certainly can attest to that. They serve farmers very well, because they and we all agree it is farmers first.

It is always a pleasure and a privilege to bring matters of agriculture before this House, because agriculture, of course, does matter. It matters to the economy, it matters to the job market, and it matters to the health and well-being of all Canadians.

Business of Supply

As we know, these main estimates are normally discussed in committee, not this setting of committee of the whole. However, in the current global economy the world needs a strong, profitable agricultural industry now more than ever. So I welcome this debate.

The security and stability of our food supply starts with a strong, vibrant farm gate, and we have one. That is why all our programming puts farmers first. That was the focus of a recent G8 agricultural ministers meeting in Italy. I was proud to be there.

This government is working with producers to overcome the challenges they face, to build a stronger, more profitable agriculture sector in Canada.

As we have heard tonight, the H1N1 situation is a serious challenge for our pork industry. We have made it very clear to domestic consumers, as well as to our trading partners, that Canadian pork is safe and continues to be safe.

The international scientific community, including the World Organisation for Animal Health and the World Health Organization, agrees that H1N1 is not a food safety issue. We will continue to reassure Canadian consumers and our international trading partners of that argument. We will keep working with our trading partners to make sure that trade decisions are based on sound science and the fact that our pork is safe.

We will continue to stand with our pork producers and work with CPC to get our great industry back on track. I was proud to see the great show of support at our pork barbecue on Parliament Hill last week. This government is not afraid to take action at the WTO if the trade decisions made by our trading partners are not firmly rooted in sound science.

We have shown that resolve by launching consultations with the United States over their mandatory idea for country of origin labelling.

Our actions for the Canadian swine industry speak louder than words. We extended the time period covered by the cull breeding swine program, a program developed in conjunction with the industry. We have invested up to \$76 million to help hog producers control disease. As part of this investment, in March we announced another \$40 million to help producers develop and implement biosecurity best management practices, research projects and long-term disease risk management solutions.

Our next generation of farm support programs are delivering more than \$1 billion, some \$1.3 billion, to livestock producers, including pork producers, for 2007-08. We are getting this money out quickly and effectively, thanks to AgriStability interim payments and targeted advance payments that we have reworked to be as farm friendly as possible.

We have extended emergency cash advances of up to \$400,000, with the first \$100,000 interest-free, a significant increase since we took office. That has delivered another \$500 million in cashflow directly to the farm gate. At the request of livestock producers, I announced a stay of default for up to a year and a half on these loans. This stay covers almost \$500 million in advances to the livestock sector. This government will continue to pay the interest on the first \$100,000 through that period.

We are expanding slaughterhouse capacity with funding in the neighbourhood of \$50 million. The government knows farmers want to make their money in the marketplace, not the mailbox. That is why we are getting out on the world stage to help them sell their great Canadian agricultural products.

We are working with the value chains. We have launched the market access secretariat to aggressively and proactively address market access challenges.

A key component of our trade and market development program is the \$88 million AgriMarketing program, which will help promote more of Canada's safe, high-quality, world-class products to a hungry world.

We continue helping producers weather the current economic storm. We are also looking to the future when those clouds clear. According to a recent analysis by the department, average net operating income of Canadian farmers rose by 27% between 1990 and 2006. Moreover, aggregate farm cash income is expected to increase again in the years 2007 to 2009.

Over the past 10 years, the average total farm assets increased 38%, average net worth increased 41%, and the debt-to-asset ratio, as I have already said, has now risen by only three-quarters of 1%.

Producers do not want to stay in the same old rut. We cannot use yesterday's solutions to solve these new and emerging challenges. Farmers want to take advantage of the opportunities that are out there.

●(1925)

Our economic action plan for Canada will make sure businesses, including agriculture, come out of the current global situation stronger than ever. The economic action plan is building on a campaign promise by delivering \$500 million through the agricultural flexibility plan. This new program will help farmers by promoting innovation, ensuring environmental sustainability and responding to the market challenges and opportunities. We are getting the job done for Canadian farm families, building stable, bankable, predictable programs, tapping new market opportunities at home and around the world and strengthening Canada's food safety system.

This government is delivering more resources and stronger regulations for that food safety system. We are investing in food safety after years of neglect and cuts. This government has invested another \$113 million to enhance the safety and reliability of our systems. We have hired new food safety inspection personnel, an increase of some 14%, and we will hire more as needed.

Business of Supply

Budget 2009 allocated \$250 million to address maintenance at federal labs, key links in Canada's health and food safety systems. We have initiated an independent investigation into last summer's recalls to find new ways to strengthen the system. We welcome the appointment of Sheila Weatherill, a very qualified lead investigator. We look forward to her recommendations as we continue to strengthen our food safety system. We also welcome the lessons learned introspectively by all the other departments involved.

This government continues to take a proactive approach to agricultural programs. We listen to farmers and we develop these programs. We now have a suite of stable, bankable programs to make sure farmers can weather economic storms and continue to help drive this economy. We continue to assess and analyze the impact of these programs and we have shown we will make adjustments when and where required.

We are also looking to the future with industry. This government took action. The Prime Minister announced this government's new legislation to guarantee an estimated \$1 billion in new loans over the next five years for Canadian farm families and cooperatives. It will help beginning farmers take over the family farm, a very important point as we see the average age of farmers rise.

As the Prime Minister said, "Farmers remain the backbone of the local economy for hundreds of communities throughout Canada. These farmers deserve to know that they can count on the credit they need to build and grow their operations".

This government is making sure Canadian farmers have a firm foundation. We are creating the opportunities they need to succeed over the long term. Over the next five years, government is investing over \$1 billion in the growing forward programs that are cost shared with the provinces and territories. Growing forward recognizes that every farm in every region is unique. The one size fits all programming is a thing of the past. The new suite of programs allows us to tailor programming to address regional needs. Flexibility is a key element of growing forward because that is the best way to make sure that every investment we make hits the target at the farm gate.

On top of my priorities this year to get a foot in the door with our key customers and build new markets around the world, as well as re-energize some relationships with our long-standing trade partners, I have said before that farmers do not want to farm the mailbox, they want to make their money in the marketplace that is where it is best. Farmers are not standing still and neither are we as a government.

This government is opening and expanding markets so that our farmers can sell more products to more customers around the world. Over the past few months, we have successfully reopened beef access in Hong Kong, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. We have worked to expand pulse markets in India. We are keeping up the pressure with trade missions to Morocco last month and other key markets in the coming weeks and months.

We have signed free trade agreements with the European Free Trade Association, Peru and Colombia. Of course, we continue to build a respectful relationship with our biggest trading partner to the south, the United States, as well as with Mexico and Japan.

Every time we resolve a trade irritant or expand the market, we are adding to the strong bottom line for Canadian farm families. We are making sure our producers can continue to drive the Canadian economy as we all face the current global economic uncertainty.

To close, I want to thank all the portfolio team in agriculture for doing a great job of advancing the sector. On a whole range of issues we are working together to help producers and the whole value chain to proactively capture those new opportunities.

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Madam Chair, I listened with great interest to the minister as he outlined some of the programs and projects that our government is implementing.

I come from a riding that has a strong agricultural base. It is quite diverse; there is everything from cow-calf operations to canola, wheat, and coarse grain operations. There is a wide variety of different farming endeavours.

I was invited by a number of farmers to a meeting a short time ago. I went there with some concern as to what I might hear. I was pleasantly surprised by their remarks about some of the changes that have been made in the last three years to some of the farm programs. In fact, I will not forget one of the comments that was made, which is that the programs have never been this good since the days of John Diefenbaker. I would like to pass that on to the minister.

There is a question that farmers want me to ask the minister. He touched on it in the last part of his remarks, but I would like him to elaborate on it. They are concerned about the protectionist tendencies in the United States. They really do not want to depend on farm programs, even though they have been improved. They would like to know what other endeavours the minister is engaged in and what these mean to the farmers' bottom line.

My question is really twofold. What is being done to continue to ensure we have access to markets in the United States? What is the minister doing other than that to ensure that our farmers can get more returns from the marketplace?

• (1930)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I know the member for Yorkton—Melville is very much involved with farmers in his riding. I have had the opportunity to attend some of the round tables he has held in Yorkton over the years and they are always great fountains of information.

Certainly there is concern. He said that the last time farmers had access to good programming was under John Diefenbaker. That speaks to the age of farmers out there. It underscores that line.

We are certainly working hard to reinvigorate markets. The United States is our major trading partner. It is the closest one to us and there has been a free flow of information and goods back and forth, which has been especially underscored since NAFTA. That certainly expedited a great deal of income for farmers with that new free trade agreement.

We have to be vigilant. We have to make sure that the free trade is also fair trade, that the rules are embraced and followed. We continue to work with our American counterparts regardless of what political side they are on. I have developed a good relationship with my colleague, Tom Vilsack, the new secretary of agriculture. I know my colleague, the Minister of International Trade, has that same good camaraderie and working relationship with Ron Kirk, the secretary of trade.

We continue to work with them on how to get past this country of origin labelling situation in which they have found themselves. We continue to work with them on ways forward. We put one challenge in place that gave us the rule that we needed changed. The final rule came out in the script that we wanted it. Then the new administration added a little more voluntary and a little more mandatory, which is creating a lot of frustration. We have initiated the second challenge on that one and we will work with our American allies on that.

At the same time that we are working to reinvigorate that trade, we are opening new trade corridors around the world. Of course, we all look with envy at the Pacific Rim and the great job that is done by some countries, like Australia and so on. We have been out of that picture for a number of years. For the last year and a half to two years we have begun to reinvigorate those channels, pulse crops in India, pulse crops in Morocco. There is a lot more grain going into Saudi Arabia than ever we have seen before as it steps back from self-sufficiency and buys the good quality durum wheat from Canada.

We are also beginning discussions with the EU. Of course, with 300 million people over there, it is a tremendous opportunity for Canadian producers. I know they look to us to lead the challenge on that, to level the playing field so they can go industry to industry and make the good deals to further the farm gate.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Madam Chair, first I would like to thank the minister for appearing today. I have been a member of the standing committee for the last couple of years, and he has been very accessible to us.

I come from a strong agricultural riding. My province's premier has taken a very bold stance when it comes to traceability and age verification. Alberta was way ahead of the country and the world when it came to this. I would like to ask the minister about the importance he sees in age verification, traceability and how important he feels it is in moving forward to open new markets.

The committee is now discussing the issue of competitiveness and many people from industry have come forward to ask us to move forward on this as well.

• (1935)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, that is such a great question because as we do build the volumes going out, we have to address what customers are asking for. The Pacific Rim countries are saying

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that they are looking for age verification so they can sell that great product in their countries of record.

Having said that, we are a national government. We want to make sure we have national standards. We do not want to see one province moving ahead of others. I certainly welcome the time that Alberta has put into this because it does have some 45% of the beef herd, and so I welcome that intervention.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Madam Chair, I must say that there is one thing I am delighted with tonight. However, I will immediately reassure my colleagues, it is not the contents of the minister's speech. I am delighted because, for once, the minister will have to give me an answer. For quite some time, actually several months, I have been asking him questions in the House about Quebec agriculture and the Minister of State (Agriculture) has been answering for him. I would say to the minister that, in all honesty, Quebec farmers feel that they have been abandoned by the real Minister of Agriculture. This evening, he will have no choice but to give me an answer.

When I stated that I was not delighted with his speech, it is because once again he made an optimistic speech in which he attempted to sell us his policies and vision for agriculture. This is the government approach to most issues: it packages them and attempts to sell them with some marketing. We know that they use negative advertising to attack their opponents. We know that they also use marketing to try to sell their policies.

That is exactly what happened before the budget. The minister will no doubt recall that he made a public announcement before the budget. I did not think that was allowed, but many ministers made announcements concerning their respective portfolios before the budget, completely divulging the contents of the budget and its various aspects. This minister also did the same thing with the program they had the nerve to call AgriFlex.

For some time now, the provinces have been asking for greater flexibility in the programs. Quebec did, as did the Union des producteurs agricoles, of course, and so did all of Canada. The Canadian Federation of Agriculture, and particularly the grain producers of Quebec and Ontario, were asking for this kind of program.

The minister managed to make the front page of certain agricultural newspapers, announcing that there would be a new program, the AgriFlex program. However, as I always say—and as I told journalists after we all saw the budget and of course noticed the major shortfalls in that announcement—the devil is in the details. There were no income security support measures. It was not at all what all the farmers were expecting. What they wanted was a real, flexible program to meet the needs of the provinces.

First of all, can the minister explain to me why his program has been reduced from \$500 million over four years, as promised, to \$500 million over five years? How is that only \$190 million in new money was injected into the program? So the rest will come from the department. Is the minister going to make cuts somewhere? I would like to know, and our farmers would also like to know. Where will he cut in order to find the money needed, that is, the \$310 million that is lacking?

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Can the minister also tell me why he did not include farm income support? How could he have possibly believed that that would be accepted? Once the marketing is done and something is passed off as “new and improved”, once people buy the product, see what it really is and taste it, in my opinion, whoever produced it could face some problems, because the consumer is not going to be happy. That is exactly what happened with this. Those are my questions for the minister at this time.

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, there were a number of issues. I certainly act with respect toward the member opposite. When my colleague the Minister of State for Agriculture, also the Minister of National Revenue, which is a great combination, answers questions in question period, he respects the francophone language and so forth. He does a tremendous job representing agriculture producers in Quebec and the rest of Canada in his role, as I feel I do in my federal role as well.

We meet constantly with farm groups from Quebec. I had a meeting a short time ago with Christian Lacasse, the leader of the UPA in Quebec. I met a few days ago with Laurent Pellerin, who is with the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. I meet all the time with the province's minister, Laurent Lessard, who was reinstated in his position after the election in Quebec. It was a tremendous opportunity to work with him again. He is a solid man and very much onside with Quebec agriculture.

I am not sure what the member opposite is talking about. Various members of our government have hosted a number of round tables in Quebec. We are fortunate to have tremendously strong representation from rural Canada. We have the numbers and we have the background. We have producers in this place who make the necessary changes to ensure the farm gate is secure.

We do not see provincial lines maybe the same as the Bloc does. We try to develop programs that are fair and reasonable and work well across the country.

The member specifically talked about agricultural flexibility and the budget. It should have come as no surprise to him or anyone else because that was a campaign pledge. This government is nothing if not solid and secure in following through on what we say we are going to do.

We said we were going to discount the GST, and we have done that. I had a schedule. It is down two points. When we talk about tax cuts, that is great news for farmers because they pay taxes too.

It should come as no surprise for the member opposite that we followed through on agricultural flexibility. We had some discussions with industry groups. There are certain ones that want to see that dumped in on top of the business risk suite, but there is no need to do that. We have a tremendous suite of programs, under business risk, that will trigger in when farmers need it the most. We have seen that happen.

We needed a proactive pillar, and that is what agricultural flexibility is. It will commercialize good ideas, find new ways to push innovation and cut input costs, all those great things that farmers have asked us to do but were never able to fund under the

old suite of programs, which were so narrowly focused under the APF.

Under growing forward, we have the reactive programming. Under agricultural flexibility, we will have the proactive programming to help farmers move forward.

● (1940)

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Madam Chair, I am stunned to hear the minister say that he does not know what I am talking about. What I am saying is very clear. I am simply saying that his government did not keep its promises.

I do not know where he was during the election campaign. The Prime Minister's office had likely asked him not to show his face too much because of the listeriosis crisis. But his party, the Conservative Party, had promised to introduce a real, flexible program for Quebec and the provinces, which the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and the UPA had called for.

He can meet with Christian Lacasse. I meet with him as well, and I am certain that my colleagues in the other parties meet with him too, just as we meet with representatives of farm producers everywhere, in all sectors. What did Christian Lacasse say after the budget was passed? What did he say when the government failed to keep its promise to introduce a flexible program, which the minister dared call AgriFlex in his budget? He said:

By excluding income support measures, where the need is greatest, the government is completely changing a program that was supposed to be flexible. A program that each province can adapt to its own particular agricultural reality is obviously a good thing, but it must be properly funded and targeted.

Christian Lacasse said that not long ago, on January 27, 2009. The minister can meet with him. Even though I will not be at the meeting, I am sure that Mr. Lacasse will remind him that he did not keep his promise.

My question is as follows. I will repeat it, because he says he does not know what I am talking about. When will there be a real, flexible program that includes risk management? It should not be excluded, which is what the minister did. Why did he exclude it? He did not tell me that either. When will the Conservatives keep the promise they made during the election campaign, just before they brought down the budget? When the budget was brought down, it no longer included the necessary measures.

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the member opposite made a comment about me disappearing during the election, but I remember being part of a debate. The Canadian Federation of Agriculture put on a tremendous debate every election. We had that down the street at the Chateau. I was on the panel for some two, two and a half, hours, but I do not remember the Bloc having a representative there at all. The member should be careful to whom he points his finger.

Talking about the future of agriculture, as the member opposite did, there are two different ways to approach it. The one way is to keep farmers reliant on the mailbox. That is not what they want. What they want is a full blown, market access type of situation. They want to access that and they want to do it in a proactive way, with the new innovative ways with which farmers come up.

Farmers are nothing, if not good stewards of the land. They produce the safest, most secure food supply in the world, bar none. We will all agree on that. I think all of us support agriculture in our own way.

That is the great thing about democracy. There is always divergence of opinions, but there is a convergence of what needs to be done.

I take what the member opposite said, but I know when he talks directly to farmers in Quebec, as do many of my colleagues who represent farmers in Quebec, he will also hear the other side of the coin. They are happy to see a government get past the old ideas of sending them a cheque to keep them in mediocrity, allowing them, in our programming, to break the mould and get out in the world with some new innovative ideas. We are constantly doing that. We are helping farmers get their feet under themselves, not forcing them to take that cheque from the mailbox and holding them back.

•(1945)

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Madam Chair, the assistance program for slaughterhouses for ruminants is another unkept promise. I have a couple of very precise and very simple questions for the minister. When will there be a decision on the parameters for the \$50 million program announced in the 2009 budget?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, we are busy working on that now. We have had a number of applications. We are working on those types of situations and we will roll it out very shortly.

There is a process that is required to move money from a government with due diligence. The unfortunate part is the Bloc constantly blocks or does not support those types of programs. Therefore, I am not sure how the member has any kind of credibility when he stands and asks us where his money is from that program. All he has done to date is vote against it.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Madam Chair, I would remind the minister that, in many cases, the Bloc Québécois does support government measures or ones from the other opposition parties. Very recently, we passed Bill C-29, which is so dear to the heart of the Prime Minister that once again he made an announcement before it was passed by the House. That is funny, because in committee today the Conservative members sabotaged the clause by clause study; it did not even take place. The minister will have to explain that to the farmers. The Prime Minister himself was singing the praises of this bill to them and I would point out again that the Bloc Québécois was absolutely in favour of it.

The same thing happened when it came time to help the swine producers and livestock producers in general. A week after the minister introduced Bill C-44, not only did the Bloc Québécois vote in favour of it, but we initiated an emergency debate in the House to help those people out. A week after that, the minister came along with Bill C-44. I even had the opportunity to speak with him about it and we were in agreement.

It is wrong to say that the Bloc is always opposed to everything and that it blocks every bill. The Conservatives can do what they did

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in the last election campaign, travel around in a bus and badmouth the Bloc, but we saw the election results.

I have one more question, and it concerns Levinoff-Colbex. Will the minister make sure that this company receives its fair share of the \$50 million they announced for the slaughter industry?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the member opposite brings up Bill C-29 and he makes a good point that it was Shanghaied at committee. I can assure members that we are very serious about getting this through, ensuring that \$1 billion in new credit, especially for new, beginning farmers, gets out there. We have been told that some new farmers in Quebec want to take advantage of this.

I am not sure what bus the member opposite is talking about. I do not remember being on a bus during the election at all, let alone being on a bus in Quebec. However, the point I made about the Bloc is that those members run hot and cold on certain issues, but at the end of the day, they have not supported the budget which would flow the money and make it accessible to Levinoff-Colbex and everybody else across the country.

Certainly we are aware of the situation at Levinoff-Colbex and we are working with it. It would have been a lot easier to get that job done earlier if members of the Bloc would have supported the budget, got it to committee, got the job done, instead of always being an anchor. I wish they would get out in front and help us every once in a while.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Madam Chair, he cannot say that the budget was not passed and the Bloc Québécois is to blame for everything. It is unfortunate, but the budget did pass, as I recall.

It is completely ridiculous to say that the \$50 million is not yet in place and in force. Furthermore, the minister did not keep his promises. When he announced the \$50 million for the slaughter industry, it was definitely not a question of loans. Now farmers in Quebec, who just put \$30 million into their slaughterhouses, are being told that, actually, it will be a loan and not a subsidy. Many slaughterhouses across Canada managed to get subsidies, but Levinoff-Colbex never received a single red cent.

Can the minister stand up and tell us here this evening that the criteria will finally be defined and that Levinoff-Colbex will get its fair share of the pie?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the member opposite is certainly mixing a lot of different issues. Personally I am not aware of any slaughter house that received a subsidy. Under the former Liberal government program, it would have to go broke in order to trigger some money. That is what the Liberals put forward during the BSE crisis, which was not helpful to anyone. It did back stop the banks, which maybe was the intention of the Liberals all along. I do not know.

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We are looking very seriously at slaughter capacity across our great country. We will work hand in hand with Levinoff-Colbex to make sure it stays alive. It serves a tremendous area in Quebec and eastern Canada. It deserves every chance to maintain what it is doing.

There is a little side issue that happened when we, as a government, worked hard to get Rule 2 into the United States. That means cattle over 30 months had access to the border south and that drove the price up, and this is affecting it.

• (1950)

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): Madam Chair, could the minister talk a little about the cattle industry? We have had some questions on that and I will continue. Hopefully I will be quick and precise and we can get some precise answers.

Many people have tried to analyze why there is a crisis in the cattle industry. We have many reports and many people meeting at committee. A report by the National Farmer Union contained a number of recommendations, and I personally handed it to the minister .

One of the recommendations is we should probably look at doing away with it captive supply, which is apparently happening in the United States. Is there consideration for this?

According to the report, although exports have tripled in the last 20 years, the money that cattle producers are making is less than half of what they made 20 years ago, yet we are exporting more and we are opening up more markets. I will give the minister and the department credit for that. We need to open up more markets, but there is obviously something else happening as to why producers are not making money. Is the minister looking at other alternatives?

My next question is this. We keep talking about the COOL and the regulations the Americans are enforcing. We are doing our best to try to resolve that situation. I often ask, what if? Do we have a plan B if ultimately at the end of the day the Americans do not budge on their COOL regulations? We need to have some kind of other plan.

Tied in with this are the slaughter houses, the money available and the programs that happen in provinces. In my province of British Columbia a lot of small producers have been hit hard because of the standardization and the pressure they perceive comes from CFIA and the federal government. Is there any thought at looking at some flexibility for small producers, which we can pass on to the provinces?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, what the member means by captive supply is that cattle are owned by the facility that ultimately is going to slaughter and sell them.

They do have a situation in the U.S. that they are addressing at this time. We do not have that situation in Canada. With the dissolution of Tyson at Brooks, Alberta, which had a 75,000-head feedlot that it filled or did not fill depending upon volumes and accessibility, this was very much checked, audited, looking at where the money went and so forth, after BSE, and it was found that it did not use that in a captive supply way.

Having said that, I know Cargill does offer a bonus. It contracts with farmers to get certain marbling, size and so forth, and that gives those farmers a premium. That is the good thing that happens when a processor works with producers.

In Alberta and some of the industry in western Canada, they are working to have better records from the slaughter facility that will redirect producers to grow better beef. I think that is a holistic approach to what is required.

I did read the NFU report, and I had the same feeling about that report as the Canadian Cattlemen's Association. The end result might have been workable, but how they got there is not. It requires a rationalization of the industry that would take out every small town that has a beef operation anywhere near it. It would take out all the farm machinery dealerships. There would be collateral damage that was not in the report. We will not go there. This is a market-driven industry.

The member is right to point out the problems, the trials and tribulations that country of origin labelling is giving, especially in our livestock sector. This is not for the processed beef; this is directed at the live beef that goes south.

It is a huge problem for the American industry as well, because they rely on a good percentage of solid Canadian product going there to give them a solid bottom line. They are as upset as we are. We are working on the American administration, from both sides, to make positive change.

• (1955)

The Deputy Chair: I am sorry to interrupt the minister, but I have said that the duration of the answer must correspond approximately to that of the question. I appreciate that the member has been doing a great job.

[*Translation*]

The hon. member for British Columbia Southern Interior.

[*English*]

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Madam Chair, although we are working toward resolving this, is there a plan B if that program does not get resolved?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, plan B is to open other markets, and we have been doing that.

With Hong Kong, it is about the offcuts we do not eat here. We love our T-bones and our rump roasts, but we do not do much with the stomachs, the tongues, the livers and so on. The idea of getting into these other markets is to bring value back into that Canadian carcass.

One other question was what we are doing with the CFIA to ensure it is a parallel to what the USDA and other markets around the world do. Last year we identified \$20 million for where we could make some changes, and we have done that.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Madam Chair, I think I will move on to another topic.

At about the time we were discussing product of Canada labelling in committee, an announcement was made by the Prime Minister that it would be now based on 98% content.

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As the minister knows, there has been some feedback that this is not realistic. The recommendation from committee was for 85% content, which would take into account sugar, salt and so forth when processing Canadian products.

I wonder if the minister is looking to resolve this so it can be a little more flexible, for example, so that peaches grown in Ontario that are combined with sugar from Cuba, or somewhere else, can actually be labelled product of Canada. That apparently cannot be done now because of the 98% regulation.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the number has been the point of much debate.

We have had tremendous discussion with consumers, who have been asking for this. They want to know that what is in that container is a product of Canada.

The way it was under the old government was that if 51% of the cost, not the content, was Canadian, it was product of Canada. It was a real perversion of the rules.

We consulted with Canadian consumers as to where they wanted to go and what they felt comfortable with. That is where the 98% came from. There were some 1,500 interventions from consumers and groups across the country. So that is where we are at.

If the hon. member cared to talk to that peach processor who is using Cuban sugar, he would find out there is a lot of sugar in Alberta.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Madam Chair, if I understand it correctly, there are no discussions to change that 98% rule at this point in time, as has been demanded by some processors in Canada.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I have a couple of quotes from a sometimes adversary, and let me make them.

... We knew long ago that this measure could improve farm incomes and provide valuable information to consumers.

I agree.

The other is:

... the new regulations provide consumers with honest information on the contents they purchase and the changes could also increase the consumption of Canadian products.

Who said that? The member for Malpeque.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Madam Chair, it was not a straight yes or no on that, so I will continue with my hundreds of other questions.

The next question deals with animal transport. We are getting many letters from folks who are concerned about the conditions, the 36 hours of transport without food, water, et cetera. I know we have had folks appear before committee on this, and there is a study in process.

I am wondering what the timeline is and when we will have some changes to these regulations that better reflect international standards. We have been talking about this for a long time. People are asking for some answers, and I would like an update, please.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, as the hon. member has said, there is a growing concern, but not everything we read or see in the newspapers and press can be attributed to this. We could drive coast to coast in 36 hours, and there is nowhere that would be required.

Any changes have to be based on sound science. They have to be based on credible information.

We are working with industry on that. Of course there have been a tremendous amount of changes. There are air-ride trailers now. We even have air-conditioned cattle plots. We have all sorts of things now.

Every once in a while there is an accident or something happens, there's an unforeseen act of God, so to speak. Having said that, we are very concerned that everything is handled humanely. There is a thing called human error that sometimes factors into it. Any of these decisions will be based on sound science and the best interests of the industry involved.

• (2000)

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Madam Chair, pursuing that for a couple of minutes, it is my understanding that Mr. Paul Mayers, in appearing before committee, said that work was continuing with colleagues at Justice to prepare regulatory amendments for consideration and ultimate publication in part 1 of the *Canada Gazette* that it would provide for formal consultative process.

I would like to know where we are in this process right now.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I take the point seriously. We are working to that end. As the hon. member pointed out, we are working with Justice. It is actually the lead on this. It is looking to us for information to validate some of these new rules that will be coming into play. They will be gazetted very soon, and we continue to move forward on that file.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Madam Chair, could the minister give me a rough timeline, so that when I answer these letters, I can say two months, three months, roughly half a year.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I will pass on the member's concern to the Minister of Justice. The timeline is more theirs than ours, but I will find out and get back to the member. I will drop the hon. member a note.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Madam Chair, how much time do I have?

The Deputy Chair: Four minutes.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I am getting some letters with respect to programs. People are concerned about the amount of money going to farmers from programs like AgriStability and the former CAIS. In one letter, a person wrote to say that AgriStability is presently only paying benefits on approximately 50% of the applications. Apparently the program has been designed to ensure that the biggest payments of \$500,000 and over are going to very large farming operations.

That does not sound like a lot of people are getting help. I am wondering if that is accurate and whether the minister has any comments on that. Does he have any figures as to what percentage of people who apply are able to tap into AgriStability and the former CAIS program?

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Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the former CAIS program is wrapping up now. We are finishing off the final year. We are also into the first year of the new suite of programing, so I cannot comment on the numbers on that yet. We will be doing a review very shortly. We have discussions coming up at the federal-provincial-territorial table, at the beginning of July, to assess that first year. We will have all of those numbers at that point. Certainly we are not going to hide anything.

If there are changes we can make that will benefit the farm gate, we will do that. I think the number, if I heard it right, was 15%. I can say that is not anywhere close. It is amazing how many people can actually trigger these types of things. It depends on the area and the type of issue, but if anyone has a concern, have them email us and we will check out that particular situation.

There are more dollars available in the programs than ever before. We are getting good comments from AgriStability. We have actually been able to adjust negative margins. We have expanded the portfolio to include a number of things. As of April, we have had—

The Deputy Chair: I will let the member for British Columbia Southern Interior continue to pursue that question if he wishes.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Madam Chair, with regard to that, do we have an idea of what the average of all benefit payments below \$500,000 would be? Do we have any figures on the average payment with AgriStability?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, it depends on a number of factors that are weather related and market related and what the reference margin was to begin with. I can assure the hon. member that with the way these programs are run, the smaller farmers are done first and the large corporate farmers are actually done towards the end of the program year. They know it is coming. They generally have better financial situations so they can carry it. As long as they get an indication of what they are going to get, they seem to be okay with that.

I can assure the hon. member that the larger farms do not take precedent over the smaller farms.

• (2005)

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Madam Chair, with regard to Bill C-29 and added help with credit, we have consulted with some stakeholders and we basically support the bill.

The Credit Union Central's only request is "to have the government confirm that it intends to retain current practices under the FIMCLA program in relation to the definition of the prime rate for purposes of the program. Currently, the prime rate for purposes is understood to be the prime set by financial institutions themselves. Credit unions wish to see this current practice continue".

Does the minister have a comment on this?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, that would certainly be the first and probably the easiest thing to do. I would reserve judgment on whether there is a way to lower the rate. Of course, the banks' idea of prime is quite a bit different from prime, so we will have to do some negotiations on that. We would like to see a much more preferential rate. Since the government will backstop those loans, there is very little risk to the bank, so we should be able to negotiate a rate that is better than the banks' idea of prime. We will seek to do that.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Madam Chair, I would like to start by reminding this House of the assistance this Conservative government has given to Canadian pork producers during these tough times. The international scientific community, including the OIE and the WHO, agrees that influenza A(H1N1) has nothing to do with food safety.

We will continue reassuring Canadian consumers and our international trade partners that Canadian pork is safe.

[English]

The government is determined to ensure the success of Canadian agriculture. The government does everything it can to make sure Canadian farmers succeed and to ensure a prosperous future for the whole sector. It puts farmers first in every decision it makes in agriculture.

Our formula is simple and it works. We listen to farmers, we work with farmers, and then we deliver the bankable, practical results that farmers need.

The minister has been on the road a lot these past months, and his efforts to build trade relations are indeed paying off. We signed a deal in India to safeguard market access for our pulse producers. We landed a breakthrough deal in Hong Kong, which can create export opportunities worth some \$26 million for Canadian beef producers. We have gone to the Middle East to reopen markets such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan to Canadian beef, for the first time in five years.

Step by step, the Conservative government and the minister are reopening markets to Canadian producers, which previous Liberal governments and the former parliamentary secretary, the hon. member for Malpeque, ignored and neglected.

The strategy is already building momentum, and it is sending a strong message to the rest of the global community that it is time their consumers once again enjoy our top quality Canadian products.

We want Canadian farmers and processors to get the credit they deserve for the high-quality products they bring to market. Our agricultural exporters are innovative and competitive, and we are working with them to expand their markets.

On April 7, we launched a new trade and market development program, part of the new growing forward agricultural framework. This program is part of growing forward, the policy framework for agriculture. The goal is to make sure exporters have the information and support they need to sell more products in more markets. By focusing attention on how we market our products, we are helping to build demand for Canadian goods and enhancing our competitive position.

Business of Supply

[Translation]

In January, we announced the establishment of a market access secretariat. This measure came directly out of the recommendations made by the beef-cattle and pork value chain roundtables.

The secretariat will better coordinate government initiatives with producers and the industry and will help keep pace with international competitors. The creation of the secretariat has been very well received by producers.

[English]

Agricultural trade is critical to Canada's economy and prosperity. In 2008 our agriculture and agri-food exports were over \$38 billion. Importantly, Canada's trade in agriculture and agri-food products contributed \$11.1 billion to our trade surplus. Each of those dollars means jobs and livelihoods for Canadians right here at home. That is why when we as a government take measures to support agricultural trade, we are not just helping farmers. We are helping all Canadians.

This government is working through the World Trade Organization. We are working one-on-one with our trading partners to build bilateral and regional agreements, and we are working with industry, all with the common goal of building our agricultural trade and opening up new opportunities for our farmers and processors.

At the WTO, we remain committed to pursuing an ambitious outcome for the benefit of Canadian farmers and their families. We want an outcome that establishes a more level international playing field and provides new opportunities for our producers, processors and exporters. Our objectives at the WTO remain the elimination of all forms of export subsidies and the substantial reduction of and strengthened disciplines on trade-distorting domestic support, and real and significant improvements to market access.

Complimenting our efforts at the WTO, this Conservative government is also pursuing an active regional and bilateral trade negotiation agenda. In recent months, Canada has signed free trade agreements with the countries of the European Free Trade Association as well as Peru and Colombia. The agreements with Peru and Colombia will benefit a wide range of agriculture and agri-food stakeholders such as the grains, oilseeds, pulses, pork and beef exporters.

• (2010)

[Translation]

We have also completed negotiations with Jordan that promise other markets. Our negotiations with Korea are progressing well, and signing an agreement with that country could significantly benefit the agricultural sector.

In addition, the recent launch of official negotiations with the European Union bodes well for Canadian agriculture.

The European Union is Canada's second-largest trade and investment partner, as the \$6.3 billion in bilateral trade in agri-food in 2008 attests. We want to strengthen that relationship and make it more profitable for our farmers.

[English]

Through these negotiations, Canada looks forward to exploring new and expanded opportunities for Canadian agricultural exporters

and farmers. As we move forward, we will continue to consult closely with the entire agriculture industry regarding how best to advance Canada's interests.

The links between Canada and our largest trading partner, the United States, are deep, diverse and complex. We share a common border that stretches across nearly 9,000 kilometres of land and three oceans. We share the world's largest trading relationship. It has been said that every minute, \$1 million in trade happens somewhere along the Canada-U.S. border. The free flow of goods is critical to our agricultural sector.

Canada's farmers depend on free and unfettered trade for their livelihoods. Our trade relationship reaps many rewards for Canada's agricultural sector. Unlike previous Liberal governments, this Conservative government is working to improve our historic relationship with the U.S. through a respectful dialogue instead of the childish attacks and insults. In doing so, Canada's Conservative government is working to improve and expand U.S. markets for cattle, hog and other agricultural products.

We are pulling out all the stops to fight mandatory country of origin labelling, or COOL, in the United States. Mandatory COOL will stifle trade with the U.S., especially for Canada's cattle and hog industries. We have consistently made it clear that current mandatory COOL regulations unfairly disadvantage Canadian producers. We are now requesting a further round of WTO consultations with the U.S. regarding mandatory country of origin labelling.

[Translation]

In taking this step, we are defending the interests of Canadian producers as we have always done and will continue to do.

These consultations are our opportunity to talk with the American authorities and find a mutually acceptable solution.

We will work tirelessly until this issue is resolved in our producers' best interests.

[English]

There are challenges facing the industry, but the long-term signs are positive.

I would like to ask the Minister of Agriculture if he agrees with this positive outlook for Canadian agriculture?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I am happy to say that I do agree. I hear that from my farmers every weekend when I go home, whether it is in the coffee shops or at the round tables we like to host with them.

Business of Supply

A number of great statements have been made about our tackling of market access, the development of the new market access secretariat, which is a combination of trade relations and sound science that is administered by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. It is well recognized around the world.

When I go country by country re-opening markets I am constantly asked, “Where has Canada been?” Australia has been aggressive. The Americans have been aggressive. Even the EU has been aggressive marketers of its products. Where has Canada been?

It is tough to explain that we had 10 or 13 years where it did not matter what agriculture did. Programs drove trade down. It shrank. We relied more on the American market. We have to get past that. We have to work harder on these other markets, and we are doing that.

Other countries and organizations welcome our top quality Canadian products. The consistency and quality of the supply is second to none. We are not just bragging about our own products. Other countries are talking about top quality Canadian products.

In the course of hard red western wheat, of course countries use it around the world to blend to make the other stuff that they buy cheaply palatable, and they will continue to do that.

I had the opportunity to visit some pasta and flour mills in Morocco that use an inordinate amount of Canadian product. They like it. They are happy with the consistency of the Canadian product. I was dismayed at what they called a number one in the sample bag from our Canadian Wheat Board, but I will take that up with Wheat Board officials in the coming weeks.

Every industry is buoyed by the fact that we are reopening those markets. We are becoming less reliant. We are putting less eggs in that American basket, if the House will excuse the pun. However, we continue to work with our American neighbours to make sure that the free flow of goods is fair and that their restrictions are not affecting our producers in a negative way.

We have also begun to work a lot more closely with the Koreans to access their market.

We are not scared to go to the WTO. Rules-based trade is where everyone should be. Canada was a great contender at the table in Geneva, making our argument, and making sure that we had access to those new markets while we safeguarded our domestic systems here at home. It is a great responsibility, but one that I share with my colleague the Minister of International Trade. We are both very proud to represent Canada on the world stage.

● (2015)

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Madam Chair, a couple of months back the agriculture minister was in my riding at a round table held at the Keady United Church. Afterward we went over to the local sales barn right next door. All the commodity groups were covered. Each and every one in the supply management sector made a special point of thanking the minister for not just being in my riding but for this government's support of supply management.

What we heard that day from other non-supply management groups was how important it was for us not to put all our eggs in one

basket and be dependent on the U.S. for all our trade. I would like the minister to tell us how important it is to look for other markets around the world for my producers and producers right across the country.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Certainly the easiest way to explain that, Madam Chair, is the more people we have bidding on our product, the better the price will be. There is a demand out there and we are seeing that on the global stage. We are also seeing it domestically.

One thing that producers need access to is to lift themselves a little further up that food chain rung and start to value add. We have certain sectors of our society that are not allowed to do that in a way that is cost effective. We have others that are. We look at those with envy from western Canada of course. I am sure we will have a little more debate on that particular enterprise later tonight.

Having said that, I am always buoyed by farmers wanting to take on the challenge to broaden their scope, to actually do more with their product, to diversify.

I know the members opposite make a big thing out of farm debt, but a good portion of that farm debt is because farmers are diversifying. They are changing to the new ways of doing things.

The young guys who are farming my land, and they cover now some 32,000 acres, use 65 foot air seeders. That scope of equipment was unheard of even a decade ago and GPS controlled steering up and down fields.

I had a great opportunity last fall, as I helped open a new ethanol facility in western Canada, to go for a ride on one of the new John Deere combines. This thing had a 36 foot header on it. We were running up and down a field with 55 to 60 bushel utility wheat at nine miles an hour and just floating along. The header is moving independently and the GPS is steering the combine. The innovation and the intensity of agriculture in this country now is phenomenal.

We still have smaller farmers who are doing very well. They tend to be more diversified and they offer us a good cross-section of top quality product. I commend them for the job they are doing too.

● (2020)

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Madam Chair, I will be sharing my time this evening with the members for Bourassa and St. Paul's.

I might just say to begin with, on the issue related to market access and market development, that the important effort on behalf of Canada in this regard did not just begin in the last year or two or three. The minister might want to look at the important history of his department and the work of veteran public servants, such as Michelle Comeau and Michael Gifford and a range of others, who have given Canada a great foundation upon which to build in terms of access to markets around the world.

Business of Supply

Tonight I want to especially ask the minister about the PFRA, the Prairie Farmer Rehabilitation Administration. Established in 1935 and headquartered in Regina, PFRA became and remains the single most successful and most respected agency of the Government of Canada in the west. Its expertise was second to none in soil conservation, water supply systems, irrigation, flood protection, pasture management, shelter belts, ground cover, community development and much more. It was hands on and it was trusted.

Largely now, unfortunately, it is over. PFRA no longer exists as a stand-alone entity within the Government of Canada. Its name has been abolished and it is now folded into some other branch of the Department of Agriculture.

I would like to ask the minister, why was PFRA killed?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, nothing could be further from the truth. Certainly, the member opposite wants to keep agriculture in the past. Farmers do not. PFRA does not. It wants a broadened mandate and a bigger scope, and that is exactly what we have given it.

We folded everything together into the Agri-Environment Services Branch. PFRA is the lead role in that. It is doing a tremendous job. We use it internationally now, when it talks about water conservancy and grassland management around the world. That is the great role that it is playing. We have broadened that scope. We are happy to do that. We are proud to do that.

There is no such thing as the PFRA is dead and gone. It has been reborn even better than it was before.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Madam Chair, typically with the government, and I have noticed this over the last three years, when it begins an answer with “nothing could be further from the truth”, it is exactly the truth.

I would advise the minister that the PFRA has been international and functioning internationally for years. It has been a lead agency for CIDA in implementing foreign aid projects, especially in Africa. It was also the agency called in by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers back when the Mississippi had the great flood back in the 1990s. So PFRA has been international for a long time.

As the attrition of PFRA continues, decision-making authority has essentially been removed from the headquarters operation in Regina and centralized in Ottawa. When PFRA people in Regina retire, their positions go vacant and they are not replaced. Attrition is indeed well underway. This is clearly the plan, to let it wither on the vine.

Will the minister specifically reverse this and run the department's environmental programs from Regina? Why not? There is no impediment to that. Why does the PFRA centre of excellence and expertise have to be the victim here?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the member for Wascana should spend more time in Regina rather than spending his weekends in Florida because he should know that there is a new director general in Regina.

The ADM from Ottawa does travel back and forth to ensure that that chain of command is intact, but there is a new director general in Regina. I would be happy to set up a meeting for the member for Wascana if he would care to meet with him tomorrow when he gets

home. We have a week out and I am certain I could make up a meeting for him during that time.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Madam Chair, I am happy to advise the minister that I do not and never have taken a holiday in Florida.

With all the minister's happy assurances tonight, will he assure the House that the full existing staff complement of the former PFRA will be maintained in Regina? Will all the regional and district offices of the former PFRA be maintained? Will all former PFRA community pastures remain intact, or are those federal pastures among the capital assets that the finance department is now proposing to sell?

• (2025)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, nothing along those lines of discussions have taken place to date and I do not foresee any in the future.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Madam Chair, I have one other issue unrelated to PFRA.

With regard to the crisis in the pork industry, is the government planning a \$30 per head emergency payment to help Canadian pork producers, as they have requested?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the member opposite should know, as WTO negotiations began under his party's mandate, which stagnated, that anything we do must fall within the purview and not be challenged. It would be senseless to close a border by initiating a payment. Certainly those discussions go on. We are working with the pork industry as to how we can do that through existing programming.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Madam Chair, I hope the minister will give some serious answers.

What I would like to know, first of all, is whether he agrees with supply management, or not.

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, absolutely.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Madam Chair, is the minister doing everything possible to protect supply management?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, and beyond. The industry is thrilled with the work we have undertaken. The last government talked the talk but did not walk the walk.

Business of Supply

As I said in an earlier answer, we initiated article 28. We have initiated cheese compositional standards. We have put in place the special safeguard. We were the only country not to have that in play. I do not know why the previous government did not get it done. I guess if it had had a fifth mandate it probably would have come around to it.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Madam Chair, we have been served up some fine words, and the usual tape.

I think we have just found out that the minister does not really know his files very well. I have here the Canada-European Union Joint Report: Towards a Comprehensive Economic Agreement. This is the first time in connection with free trade and negotiation that supply management has been called into question. Whenever there is a report of this type there is no mention of supply management.

Why does the minister not tell us, with one of his uninspiring answers, what he has done to keep supply management out of this report?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the member opposite is seeing black helicopters. I know he does that a lot in question period too.

There is nothing subversive here. Supply management is alive and well under this government and will continue to be, regardless of any free trade talks that go on. The member opposite knows these talks will take some three to five years. We are in the preliminary stages. Supply management, for all intents and purposes, for this government is off the table. We say that all the time.

The lead negotiator is Steve Verheul, a man very well respected and trusted by supply management to have the industry's best interest in play. I do not know how else we can assure the member. When supply management is concerned—

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Madam Chair, we have seen how the sense of humour of this minister affected the families of the people who died of listeriosis. He ought to adopt a more serious approach.

I will leave him a bit of time, because the families of the listeriosis victims who are watching us now are waiting for an apology from this minister. He ought to take the time to make one.

In chapter three of the report — Discussions on a possible deepened economic agreement, the following is written under point 3.1:

The Scoping Group recognized that any agreement should address the issues of agriculture export subsidies and state trading enterprises and assess any possible distortion of competition and barriers to trade and investment these issues could create.

Has Europe already won as far as supply management is concerned?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Absolutely not, Madam Chair. The European Union is notorious for some of its subsidies, which are as high as 600% to 700% on certain commodities.

We are having good, fulsome discussions, no different than we had around the table at the WTO. Supply management was never at risk and never will be under this government.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Madam Chair, he can use his canned answers and his talking points, but the fact is that people are watching us. This is the first time we have seen something like chapter 3 in a negotiation report.

[English]

We just did the framework for the negotiation and supply management is in it. It is the first time ever that we have had that kind of agreement, that kind of framework.

I want to know why the minister was sleeping at the switch instead of protecting our producers.

● (2030)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I can assure the member opposite that there is no framework. What we are beginning discussions on is a scoping exercise. This is where all free trade agreements begin. As we move forward, we set aside certain things and we work through other things. We will continue to do that but we do have a very positive track record. I am proud to support supply management. Nothing is going to change on our watch. We will continue to stand firm with our supply managed sectors.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Madam Chair, the group responsible for defining the scope of any future deepened economic agreement met three times. The group's discussions and findings defined the scope. Will the minister stand up and apologize to the families of the people who died of listeriosis?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I have done that a number of times. We look forward to the complete independent investigation report. We have had a number of other reports from all of the departments involved.

I have made my apologies a number of times and I am happy to do that again. We are working through this situation to build a stronger food safety system in this country, after the cuts that were done under the Liberal government.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Madam Chair, last summer, a number of people died of listeriosis. I cannot believe, looking at your estimates, Mr. Minister, that you have reduced the funding to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency from \$236,000 to \$220,000. To actually reduce—

The Deputy Chair: The hon. member should address her remarks to the Chair.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes, Madam Chair. I would also ask the minister to explain how the contributions to support those initiatives that contribute to the improvement, advancement and promotion of the federal inspection system can be reduced by 60%. That is down from \$335,000 to \$136,000 on page 213 of the main estimates. Could he explain himself?

Business of Supply

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, I am not sure what the member opposite is talking about. There have been no cuts to CFIA. If anything, we have increased the budget. We have increased the personnel. We have 14% more front line inspectors working than were there when we took over as government.

We continue to fully fund CFIA. There are times when we need to move funding around but at the end it is to build a better food safety system and give CFIA the funds and the personnel it needs to do the job. We will continue to do that.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Madam Chair, I would ask any Canadian watching to go to page 2 of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and look at the numbers on the page that the minister is denying.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency said that there would be developed research projects to address the gaps, that it would expand the scientific knowledge and that the focus would be on biofilms, disinfectant virulence factors and effective detection methodologies. How will the minister pay for that? Has the agency embarked on the very important table top exercises and training to ensure that the next time there is a much better performance?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: The short answer, Madam Chair, is yes. In the introspective that the CFIA did, along with the public health offices of both provincial and federal governments in their introspections, they have all identified situations that can be improved and we will continue to work on that.

We intend to fully fund the CFIA. We are anxious to get the report from the independent investigation, coupled with the four other reports that have been done. We will look at what funding shortfalls there are and address those in a supplementary budgetary process.

We do not want to just throw money at situations for money's sake. We want to ensure that it is directed to where it should be, that personnel is hired and that it builds the process that is required.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Madam Chair, in the testimony of the B. C. CDC and in the report of the Ontario public health agency there were very serious criticisms in the communication.

We know from B.C. CDC that it thinks that CFIA works perfectly well as long as there is no trouble. However, as soon as an outbreak occurs, it said that there is a serious problem with the agency sharing information. The Ontario public health officer was very clear about the confusion that existed in terms of the communication among agencies with people not sharing information.

• (2035)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, the one thing we have seen through all of the introspections that have been done is that we need better communication and co-ordination of resources. There is no doubt about that. The member opposite is absolutely right. That is the type of situation that has been addressed. We have seen that work better during the H1N1 situation already. There was better communication and co-ordination of resources among all the affected groups. She is absolutely right.

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Madam Chair, it is good to be here tonight. I want to acknowledge the minister's willingness to be here tonight and his patience with the questions he has been asked. The knowledge that he shows on his

files and portfolio has been outstanding and very impressive. I would also like to acknowledge the team that works with him on the ag committee. It is a team of very knowledgeable people. One of the things I notice about the caucus on this side of the House as opposed to the other side is that we have farmers over here. We have producers. We have people who work on the ground, who work the land. It seems to be very difficult to find any of those on the other side.

The challenge we face is how we allow our farmers to be competitive. In one area, this government is committed to bringing market choice to western Canada in order to make our farmers competitive. Under the strong leadership of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, the Government of Canada will continue to fight for farmers' freedom. The government will keep working with western Canadian grain farmers to ensure that they get the freedom they want.

We are going to continue to work to ensure transparency for producers and taxpayers as well. I am going to talk about that later. The CWB had significant losses in the financial markets in the 2007-08 marketing year. There has been no public performance review of the programs that caused those losses. I would like to look at CWB's ability to market grain. There is a lot of emotion attached to this issue. The best thing we could do is look at the results that have been studied that show what the Canadian Wheat Board is actually doing.

The Data Transmission Network, or DTN, has been an innovator in production and delivery of news and information since 1984. It is a trusted source that gathers agricultural information and publishes it. The DTN tells us that the average of U.S. elevator bid prices shows that for the last three years, the Canadian Wheat Board has earned less than farmers south of the border. This is one of the reasons western Canadian farmers are very unhappy with their marketing situation.

In 2007-08, the Wheat Board's final price on red spring with 13.5% protein was \$1.70 a bushel below the U.S. average market price for similar wheat. The year before, the Wheat Board final was \$1.17 per bushel below. The year before that, the Wheat Board again fell short of the U.S. average price by about 70¢ a bushel. I want to point out that it went from 70¢ to \$1.17. Last year when the Wheat Board was touting itself as a huge success story, its final wheat price was actually \$1.70 a bushel below the average posted in the United States.

Hon. Wayne Easter: How can you say that with a straight face, David? How can you tell that information with a straight face?

Business of Supply

Mr. David Anderson: The member across the way wants to heckle me because he does not like the facts. If we cannot compare numbers, maybe we could look at one of the studies that has been done about the Wheat Board and mention a few of the facts here so that the member for Malpeque after all these years may finally come to understand the pain and suffering that western Canadian farmers really endure because of that organization.

The Informa study, which was put out in June 2008, has been recognized and well accepted. It showed that the Wheat Board earned no premium for farmers. U.S. farmers actually received higher prices for spring wheat in five of the last six years. Our farmers are at a competitive disadvantage to U.S. farmers in five out of six years.

Canadian Wheat Board spring wheat pool returns have been on the average of about \$16 per tonne below North Dakota's prices. That is about 50¢ a bushel on average. That is a big difference for farmers. It adds up to a lot of money on their farms. Durum returns have been \$12 a tonne below North American prices. U.S. farmers received higher malt barley prices. That is really frustrating because there is no one in this country who understands the malt barley marketing system in western Canada who believes that the Wheat Board is doing a good job.

If the people at the Wheat Board could find a way out of it, I think even they themselves would like to get out of that because they know they are not doing a good job for farmers. By contrast, in the last eight years on the free market, canola prices received by Canadian farmers have been higher than canola prices received by U.S. farmers. That shows that when our farmers are put in a situation where they can compete, they actually do well. They were actually stronger than the U.S. farmers.

I would like to talk about last year in particular, because farmers paid a huge price for this marketing system. Last year the Canadian Wheat Board lost over \$300 million in its trading activities. It was farmers who were forced to take these losses because the Wheat Board does not pay for its mistakes. It does not have to, because it has someone to do that for it and that is the western Canadian farmers. The Wheat Board managed to lose \$90 million from its producer payment options. It is called a contingency fund. It has been set up to handle these producer payment option programs. It lost \$90 million in its trading in that fund. Even worse than that, in its regular discretionary trading, it lost another \$226 million. I guess the conclusion most western Canadian farmers have reached is that the Canadian Wheat Board is just too expensive for them.

• (2040)

We believe that producers deserve to see a public arm's length review of the Canadian Wheat Board. That would be reasonable. It lost \$300 million in its trading activity. It would be reasonable to ask that there be some sort of review. The reason we have had to request that the Auditor General come in was evident today in committee.

Wheat Board representatives were actually at the agriculture committee today. They talked about a small report they had done about the risk management practices. When we asked if members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food could have access to that report, they told us they would not let us have access to that report.

I do not know if I have been in a committee in the nine years that I have been here, where someone has refused to provide information to a committee. I cannot remember another time when that has happened.

We brought forward a motion to request that the board supply that report to the committee. The opposition worked very hard to stop that. In fact, Bill C-29 was to be discussed this afternoon and the opposition chose to filibuster the motion for us to get the report.

Hon. Hedy Fry: That is not true.

Mr. David Anderson: Then, and this is the big surprise—

Hon. Wayne Easter: Not true.

Mr. David Anderson: —with half of the meeting left, the opposition members walked out of the committee so that they did not have to deal with the motion or Bill C-29.

Mr. Joe Preston: Shameful.

Mr. David Anderson: It was very strange. You should have been there, Madam Chair. You would have wondered what happened. Actually, if members want to find out what happened, maybe they could read the transcripts. That would be the best place for people who really want to check out what happened. They would see the evidence of—

An hon. member: The antics.

• (2045)

Mr. David Anderson: Yes, the antics of the opposition on that committee.

We are committed to having western Canadian farmers have some understanding of what happened last year with the marketing problems that the Canadian Wheat Board had and the money that western Canadian farmers lost.

As the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food has said often, entrepreneurs need as many options as possible to market and sell their goods. This has never been more true than in today's economy.

We want farmers to have the freedom to choose whether to sell grain on the open market or through the Canadian Wheat Board. We believe that farmers deserve to have the ability to add value to their crops and capture more profits beyond the farm gate.

They also deserve to have the opportunity to seek out the best possible return for their own product, just as they can with canola, the pulse crops, cattle or any other number of farm products right across this country. They take all the risks, make all the investments and they should be able to have complete control of the marketing of their own products.

A Canadian Wheat Board monopoly on wheat was imposed by Parliament because of a variety of dynamics and reasons over 70 years ago. The barley monopoly is over 60 years old and today's market realities are vastly different. Today there are numerous new and growing exporters and export markets around the world.

Business of Supply

We have moved away from the commodity procurement of the past where we just had bulk amounts of grain grown, bulk amounts sold and bulk amounts delivered to a situation in which a large number of mainly private buyers want to be able to select a range of quality attributes for particular market segments. This niche development is taking place everywhere.

In fact, the other day in the agriculture committee Dr. Brian Fowler talked about how many of the varieties that are being developed in Saskatoon and elsewhere in Saskatchewan cannot be used in Canada because of the Canadian Wheat Board marketing system. Our good friends in Montana and other American states get to benefit from the research that is done in our country because of our marketing system.

Buyers want high quality products which Canadians produce but they want them delivered at a certain time, in a certain way, in a manner that farmers are best able to meet. Farmers are looking for new value-added revenue streams and greater marketing flexibility. We are listening to farmers. We want them to succeed.

Currently by law, western Canadian grain growers do not have the same rights as other producers in this country about where to sell their products. They do not have the rights that they enjoy with their other crops.

The Deputy Chair: I must interrupt the hon. parliamentary secretary at this point. The 10 minutes for his intervention are over. Does he have a question for the minister?

Mr. David Anderson: Madam Chair, voters in western Canada, where the Canadian Wheat Board operates, consistently elect Conservative MPs fighting for market choice. The Liberal Party and the NDP do not have a single seat in those western wheat-growing areas, yet they claim to represent western farmers, as does the Bloc, by the way. They also claim that farmers do not want choice. Could the minister tell us why they do not have seats in western Canada? Is it because they refuse to give farmers choice?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Madam Chair, there are a number of situations that underscore it, including the gun registry. One could lump all three of the parties in with that failed system, too.

The problem one sees with programs that are out of date and are 60 or 70 years old on marketing barley, is that one cannot address today's challenges with yesterday's programs. One just cannot do that, and farmers are the first to say so. The problem we have is that the Wheat Board then maybe filled a role that government saw, but it never filled a role that farmers saw.

The Wheat Board has become a monopoly buyer, not a monopoly seller. Over half of the product it now buys on paper is exported or used domestically by the line companies, even by the independent terminals. It is a monopoly buyer, not a monopoly seller. When the member pointed out the numbers, the hon. member for Malpeque took exception to them, but those are quantifiable numbers. They are there.

Farmers are on the Internet. Years ago when the government first talked about high-speed Internet access, farmers were the first ones to leap on that, whether through satellite, dial-up, whatever, so they could check what their American cousins were doing. We have a

number of farmers who farm on both sides of the border, so we know those comparisons are accurate.

In western Canada we are missing the ability to value add in an efficient way. Right now we have an arcane system where one has to phone the board and say, "I have 5,000 bushels of barley I want to take to Biggar", which is 40 miles from where I live. I trucked it myself. I paid freight and elevation to tide water. I had to do a buy-back from the board and I had not even loaded it onto my truck yet. That is the ridiculous situation we find. If we had a little thing called property rights in this country, it would take care of a lot of that, too.

We are not allowed to value add. There is a 500,000 tonne shortfall of malt barley globally. We grow the best malt barley anywhere in the world in western Canada, and we are not allowed to make it into malt because we cannot get by that little hurdle called the Canadian Wheat Board.

We have tried. We did a plebiscite; we did a referendum, if one wants to call it that, which is required by the act. Sixty-two per cent of farmers responded by saying that the status quo is not good enough, that we have to move beyond.

The Wheat Board asks very similar questions all the time. The same responses came back with very similar numbers. It said it would address this by coming up with a new program called cash plus. It tried to develop a program where it would give farmers most of their money upfront. It did that, and farmers would not buy into it because it is too restrictive, too narrow in focus like the old farm programs were.

The Wheat Board, to save itself and win the public relations war, tried to develop new programs. The member alluded to the losses in the contingency fund, which is what backstops those new programs. It was \$40 million a couple of years ago. The board had an introspective look done on it called the Gibson report, and the board felt it had everything fixed. What happened last year? It lost two-and-a-half times as much after it said it had everything fixed.

The Wheat Board just cannot understand this free market idea. Its analysis is somehow flawed. That leads to the reality in western Canada that the Wheat Board is becoming less than viable. We talk about its not being cost effective and not being cost efficient, and it is losing market share. Any one of us who lives there can say this, and the numbers will bear this out, that it does not have the acres signed over to wheat, durum and barley that it used to have, simply because farmers are making the move into other crops, such as pulse crops and canola, which have become world class, developed right out of the western provinces, for that matter.

Farmers are not scared about marketing those products themselves. They have done well. As I said, they built world-class products to do that.

Business of Supply

At committee today I heard the Wheat Board itself allude to the fact that there are some real problems with its voters list. We saw that in the last election. There are a tremendous number of voters who produce absolutely nothing and still have access to a ballot. There are another 42%, some 84,000 voters who are on that list, who produce less than what would come off of one field, less than a B train of product. Twenty per cent of the farmers control 80% of the votes, and that is an untenable situation. We will seek to rectify that.

• (2050)

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Chair, a rather unusual situation has arisen in my riding. A weather station in Stanstead is managed by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada as well as by the organization responsible for agricultural insurance in Canada. However, it is included in Environment Canada's budget. This station is used to take hydrometry readings for hay fields.

Two years ago, we had a great deal of rain and many farmers lost their hay crops. When farmers applied for compensation to the appropriate organization in Canada, only one person was refused. The problem was that she lived next door to a neighbour who had a fence and the weather station covers a certain area. When the Financière agricole du Québec went to check out this situation, it found that the weather station was in a stand of maples. The hydrometer could not measure the amount of rain because the station was tucked away among the maples.

Everyone, except for that lady, was reimbursed or compensated. Since the equipment is not in the right place and is hidden in a building, will the minister move this weather station and then be able to provide fair compensation for hay producers?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, that is an interesting situation. If the member for Compton—Stanstead wants to give me the particulars, certainly we will look into it.

The member will know that what she is talking about is crop insurance. The lady was not covered because they said it did not rain where she said it did. That happens every once in a while, and we seek to rectify those situations.

The member will also know that crop insurance is a joint situation. There is the federal government, the provincial government, and the farmers themselves.

Certainly if she wants to give me the particulars, we will seek to rectify that. I look forward to that.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Chair, the lady in question will be pleased with this answer because she has been seeking compensation for two years. The federal authorities and the Financière agricole du Québec have always been at loggerheads. Everyone passes the buck and no one wants to deal with the problem. I thank the minister, as we will now solve the problem.

The minister spoke earlier about products with 98% Canadian content. When I was on the committee, even though I am not a farmer, I asked the chair whether sugar cane is grown in Canada. She answered that all sugar is imported from Cuba. The minister tells me

that there is sugar in Alberta. I hope it is not oil sands sugar. She told me that sugar cane is not grown in Canada. That is why the 98% rule is not acceptable. I remember that in committee even the Conservatives voted for the 85% rule.

Why stubbornly refuse to accept the 85% rule, as recommended in committee, rather than the 98% rule?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I thank the member opposite for the intervention.

Certainly there is sugar grown in Alberta. It is sugar beets; and refined down, it is white sugar. It is very similar.

The lady from the organization that the member is talking about was correct that there is no sugar cane grown here, but there are other substitutes out there and I would certainly ask them to entertain those.

The option of 85% certainly was considered, but what consumers were asking for was more than that. Processors will always say that it is too much, but it is the consumers we were addressing with this particular one. Consumers, on the other end of the scale, are saying that is where they want to go; that is the number that should be there. The 98% allows for spices, sugar, salt and all those other things.

We even produce salt in this country. Anybody who says they have to import salt is wrong, as well. The only mine I have in my area is a salt mine. They flood down into a salt deposit, bring it up, dry it, and so on. It is Sifto salt, a world-recognized name. It is actually in my riding.

So there are salts, sugars and other capacities in Canada to address that 98%. We have had a tremendous response from consumer groups and from farmers themselves saying this is where they want to be.

Certainly there are going to be naysayers from the processing side. We will work with them on a case-by-case basis to make sure that they have access to the—

• (2055)

The Chair: The hon. member for Compton—Stanstead.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Chair, we must not be talking to the same producers. Local producers involved in secondary and tertiary transformation are not in favour of the 98% rule. They say that, with such a high cut-off, they have no reason to use Canadian products. It is a vicious circle. If they have to buy cheaper products from outside Canada, that affects Canada's entire agricultural economy.

Is the minister aware that these regulations that are supposed to support Canadian products will do exactly the opposite? Has he considered that from the perspective of the Canadian and Quebec economy?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, the product of Canada label is a tremendous marketing tool, because everybody knows a Canadian product is safe. But there are a number of other ways to assess that.

Business of Supply

We had some discussions with processors. I cannot divulge who they were, but they gave me an example of a product made with 100% Canadian potatoes. The label does not say “Product of Canada”, but it does say “100% Canadian potatoes”, splashed across it. That is what they worked with if they could not hit the 98%. It is a tremendous opportunity to do that.

There is also backing down to what is reprocessed. The member's colleague raised the issue one day in the House. He talked about importing cocoa beans and sugar to make a product and putting Quebec blueberries in it, but he could not call it a product of Canada. We do not grow cocoa beans here, so that is a problem to begin with.

One could say, “Good quality Quebec blueberries”—

The Chair: Order, please. I am going to try to be equal with the time as much as I can.

The hon. member for Compton—Stanstead.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Chair, I will have to ask longer questions so that he has enough time to respond properly.

I would like to return to the issue of specified risk materials. Earlier, we were talking about Colbex and \$50 million for slaughterhouses. In my riding, the loveliest in the world, there is a rabbit producer who has to drive 12 hours in his truck to have his rabbits slaughtered. When they get there, they are stressed out and their fur is standing on end.

Does the minister think it makes sense to have to drive that many kilometres to slaughter rabbits when \$50 million has been promised to renovate, refurbish and build new Colbexes? If we do not have the facilities to slaughter these animals, will we not become more and more dependent on the United States?

I am a strong advocate of food sovereignty. I think that if we want to work toward food sovereignty, we have to look to ourselves, not our neighbours.

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I absolutely agree. Country of origin labelling is driving the need for more processing capacity here in this country. We have started to address that. If we find that there is tremendous uptake, I will go back to cabinet and argue that it should be expanded. I am more than prepared to do that.

I am not sure of the issue the member is talking about with respect to rabbits having to travel 12 hours. Is this to get to a federally inspected plant as opposed to a provincial plant, so that they can be exported? Certainly that is a factor. The market will drive that.

If there is a demand for rabbit, the program that we have will allow the provincially inspected plant to upgrade to a federal plant. It can make an application under the slaughter-capacity program that we are just bringing out.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Chair, speaking of rabbits, I contacted the minister's office. It is convenient, since the Minister of National Revenue is also the Minister of State (Agriculture).

A rabbit producer filed her tax return in 2006. She received money from the Canadian farm families options program. In 2007, she earned the same income, but she indicated she had \$100,000 in RRSPs. She did not take the money out of the RRSPs; she had simply worked hard to save that amount. The Canada Revenue Agency, however, refused to help her with any form of compensation through the Canadian farm families options program.

She has been fighting for it for a year and a half. They have been arguing back and forth. Although she had earned \$100,000 and put that money into RRSPs, what does that have to do with the Canadian farm families options program, knowing that she did not earn any more in 2007 than she did in 2006? Could you help this woman and ask the Canada Revenue Agency to review her application so she may be compensated, as in past years?

● (2100)

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I will be honest right up front and tell the member opposite I have no more clout with the Canada Revenue Agency than she does, but certainly I can speak to my colleague to find out the particulars. If the member would care to send those, certainly we will take a look at it.

I know there were guidelines and formulas within the farm families options program that talked about overall net worth. Maybe that is the sticking point, where they included the \$100,000 of RRSPs. The argument, then, as to whether they should have or should not have would be a Revenue Canada argument, not necessarily one for us. However, I would be happy to take that to my colleague if the member cares to send me all the particulars.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Chair, I asked the minister the question because it has to do with agriculture. As we know, agriculture has seen a number of crises involving pork, beef and so on. This woman does not want to be at the mercy of a crisis involving rabbits.

I would like to come back to the listeriosis crisis in Quebec and the importation of contaminated cheese.

Can the minister verify that no cases of listeriosis P93 were confirmed outside of Quebec?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, of course, the member opposite would recognize or realize that the listeriosis in cheese situation in Quebec was at provincially registered plants. They did ask for us to do some testing at the CFIA level to do comparisons.

As to that particular strain, I am not aware of it anywhere else in Canada. It is possible, but off the top of the top of my head, I do not know. We will seek to find that out for the member, concerning that particular strain.

Business of Supply

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Chair, I remember that the committee asked the minister if the government intended to hire inspectors. He said yes. The committee wanted to know how many inspectors were to be hired and where they were to be posted. The members even asked for a list.

The minister has not yet provided that list. Can the minister provide the list of people hired? I am not interested in their names or their salaries; I want to know where they are posted. Are there more of them in Winnipeg, in Montreal or in Ontario? It would be interesting to find out if there are enough inspectors to make sure that we do not have another listeriosis outbreak.

People died. My colleague, Francine Lalonde, caught listeriosis in hospital and, since I quite like her, I would not want her to join the ranks of the 20 dead.

That is why it is so important for the minister to tell us that he hired inspectors and that they are on site, competent and doing good work.

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Absolutely, Mr. Chair, and of course, we will be hiring more and more as the need increases and we ask the CFIA to do more work. To date, under the current government, we have hired some 207 inspectors. That ups the number by about 14% to what it was originally.

My colleague, the president of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, assures me that the list has gone to the committee, to the best of her knowledge. We will double-check that.

We can give a regional breakdown, but we cannot give specifics as to where Joe Smith works, due to privacy situations. However, we can certainly give a breakdown as to what is available in Quebec.

It is a mobile workforce, as we see a need. For example, with regard to the listeriosis in cheese in Quebec, of course there is no one from the CFIA on those sites, but a number of people were sent in to help with that particular outbreak, doing lab tests, and so forth, back in the labs themselves, which are in other locations.

We will seek that list for the member.

● (2105)

[Translation]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member has 30 seconds left, enough time for a 15-second question and a 15-second answer.

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Chair, I will talk quickly about organic products.

More and more, farms in Quebec are producing organic products. The government has unveiled a new logo for organic products and a standard Canada Organic Regime designation, but certified products from other countries will be allowed to use the same logo as Canadian organic products.

Will the minister go back to the drawing board and come up with a proper policy so that consumers are no longer misled and we do justice to Quebec producers?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Absolutely, Mr. Chair, the organic sector is an exciting new growth industry. We are seeing global recognition of it. We want to make sure that our regulations parallel what is done by other countries so that we do not add costs to our producers.

If anyone, in Quebec's case, goes beyond that benchmark, good for them. It will help them market their product.

The Chair: I should remind hon. members to refrain from using the second person and proper names of members of Parliament.

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Mr. Chair, it is a pleasure to be here tonight and to speak about agriculture and the main estimates. Being a farmer myself, it gives me I think maybe a different meaning than for some. Not all of us can be in agriculture but I am very proud of my background.

I will concentrate my comments tonight mainly on the subject of country of origin labelling.

Farming is the backbone of the Canadian economy and it is by far the most important industry in my riding of Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound. Knowing this, I am very pleased that the government, our Minister of Agriculture and all us have worked hard to try to put farmers first when developing agriculture policy.

Agriculture is a very progressive, innovative and, in most recent years, a very competitive industry. This industry has billions of dollars in sales.

As hon. members know, country of origin labelling, or COOL as it is commonly known, is impacting a number of sectors across the agriculture industry. We have already seen that it caused a plummet in weanling prices for our hog producers last year due to the uncertainty and fear among U.S. buyers. The impact is particularly hard on the livestock industry as it adds new costs into the system in segregation, handling and other requirements.

I know from talking to the cattle, hog and lamb producers in my riding, and some from across the country as well, that they have gone through a great deal of hardship in the past seven years. Producers are still feeling the effects of BSE, global red meat prices have slumped continually and they have experienced droughts and flooding in many regions of the country.

On top of what producers have called the perfect storm for the beef industry, the advent of COOL has been like the U.S. throwing salt in the already open wounds in our red meat sector.

In a number of sectors, including red meat, we are witnessing what has been called a thickening of the Canada-U.S. border. We have been working very hard with the industry to try to reduce the impact of this and we have had some good progress on a number of fronts.

In November 2007 the U.S. border opened to our older cattle and beef from older animals, with the introduction of the BSE second rule. This has given our producers a bigger share of the market. Since then, we have taken action to ensure that the border remains open by participating in U.S. litigation to support the rule.

Business of Supply

We have also worked with the Mexican secretary of agriculture to get the Mexican border reopened to Canadian cattle, plus access for breeding animals and dairy replacement heifers.

We worked with the CFIA and industry to head off the enhanced testing that was put in place south of the border following the U.S. E. coli recalls.

On COOL more specifically, the United States implementation of country of origin labelling has been a huge concern to this government and our producers since it was first proposed. That is why we did not hesitate to let our southern neighbours know that we would vigorously oppose these measures. We will continue to assess the impact of COOL as it moves along. We hold it in abeyance.

The Prime Minister raised the issue with President George Bush and Canadian ministers have raised it with their U.S. counterparts. We have now raised it with the current President Obama and Secretary Vilsack. We have advanced the pace of the WTO challenge. We have been very clear with the Americans that we will have to undertake this if they proceed down this road.

We have let the Americans know that we will use all the trade dispute mechanisms at our disposal to ensure Canada is treated fairly and retains access without unreasonable regulatory barriers for our producers.

Our Minister of International Trade also made it clear when he said in a statement that “We believe that the country of origin legislation is creating undue trade restrictions to the detriment of Canadian exporters”.

As I said earlier, the livestock sector is a highly integrated industry in North America. Last year almost \$4 billion in livestock, beef and pork crossed our borders.

Producers and processors on both sides depend on the free flow of goods. That is why last December this government initiated formal consultations with the U.S., under the WTO dispute settlement process, regarding mandatory COOL.

Canada expects the U.S. to live up to its international trade obligations. COOL threatens to disrupt that flow by adding needless costs and red tape into the system on both sides of the border. COOL will hurt the competitiveness of the integrated North American packing industries. It will drive down prices for Canadian livestock producers, which will eventually hurt the prices American ranchers receive as well.

• (2110)

There really is not a Canadian, or American or Mexican market. It is a completely integrated North American market. In this integrated cattle herd, individual animals sometimes cross borders numerous times for feeding before going to slaughter.

Breeding bulls and heifers have been sold between the two countries for over a century. There is no legitimate rationale for COOL to be applied to live cattle slaughtered in the United States. Whether the cattle are born and raised in the U.S. or Canada, they have been subjected to similar regulatory regimes, farming practices and they share the same lineage.

It is clear that COOL is only about discriminatory trade protection for a select few producers in the U.S. COOL is damaging to U.S. feedlots, backgrounders and packing plants.

Free and fair trade is essential to the economic health of livestock industries on both sides of the borders. We have been standing up for Canadian producers since the spectre of COOL first surfaced.

The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food has been very engaged in this issue, both before and after the new U.S. administration took office. The Minister of International Trade, as I mentioned earlier, has constantly raised this issue in his conversations with his American counterparts.

Throughout this situation, we have maintained a respectful relationship with our American neighbours, but make no mistake, we mean what we say.

We have consistently made it clear that current COOL regulations unfairly disadvantage Canadian producers. Until we receive the result that is fair for Canada, we will continue, and we must continue, to stand up for Canadian producers against COOL.

The current COOL regulations add huge costs and red tape for Canadian cattle and hog exports heading south. We must continue to restate that point strongly and respectfully, as we work with our American counterparts dealing with the COOL issue.

I want to talk a little about R-CALF. As I said, we have been trying to stand up for producers, we are standing up producers and defending our sector against the court challenges from R-CALF. In July 2005 my good friend and my colleague, the member for Selkirk—Interlake, as opposition members at the time, and we were opposition members, were the only elected members of this Canadian Parliament to attend the U.S. 9th circuit court of appeals in Seattle, Washington to show our support for the fight against R-CALF, something of which the member for Selkirk—Interlake and myself are very proud.

The government must continue its work to restore access to markets and opening new ones. Over the past few months, we have re-opened beef access in Hong Kong, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. We are keeping up the pressure with trade missions to Morocco and other countries. These are all good signs of progress, but there is still a lot of work to be done.

The government plans to pursue commercially significant access to beef markets as a first step in achieving full access, mandating by the World Organization for Animal Health. We are also working hard to diversify our global business through an ambitious agenda for the negotiation of bilateral free trade agreements, and I will use Peru and Colombia as examples there. EFTA is one that has recently come through the House.

Business of Supply

We are working hard to resume trade access in cattle and beef with China. Competitiveness is about trade and it is about innovation at home as well. That is why we support the efforts of the beef and pork value chain round tables. That is why we are working with industry to help it build a strong, positive Canada brand. Let buyers know that no matter what product they choose, if it is Canadian, it comes backed by a commitment to quality and a world-class regulatory system.

That is why we are investing in research into beef and pork quality at a research station in Lacombe. That is why we invested \$130 million in federal-provincial dollars to help the sector adjust to the enhanced feed ban.

There are still challenges and we are trying to work through them. There is a great opportunity for this sector. The global demand for protein is growing.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

• (2115)

The Chair: Order, please. If the hon. members want to ask questions, they will wait until it is their turn. Right now it is the member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

Mr. Larry Miller: Mr. Chair, if the members from across the way had spent this much time raising their voices and their concerns for agriculture in their 13 years in government, we would not be sitting where we are today.

The member for Malpeque—

Hon. Wayne Easter: Was it coming from the trained seal from the back?

The Chair: Order, please. If the members of the Liberal Party want to speak now, I might have to take some of their time and give it to the member so he can finish.

The hon. member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

Mr. Larry Miller: Mr. Chair, that just cannot be relevant when he is all over the country and never in his own riding.

The minister has done a lot of work in trying to create some things that will help out young farmers. My youngest brother is farming and I know the obstacles he is up against. We did some things to help get some interest-free loans out to young farmers and also made some changes to the capital gains to help the generational transfers across.

Could the minister speak to the advantages of this?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, these are political issues and they have to be. A lot of people are concerned with the future of agriculture. There is no doubt that it is in good hands with this government in play.

The member talked a lot about free trade, but it also has to be fair trade. We are here to ensure that country of origin labelling is fair and does not negatively affect our producers, which we are scared it will.

The problem is the frustration of the unknown. We were able to work with the former administration to get the rules changed to combine two labels and make that much more palatable for the

Canadian industry. Since that time, the new administration has decided to go a bit further voluntarily, but said that after six months if we did not measure up to this, it would make it mandatory.

That is where the concern is. That is why we have launched the second challenge, just to address that.

The member mentioned our colleague, the member for Selkirk—Interlake, who is a tireless crusader for the livestock sector. He was a cow-calf operator and so on. He has had some tough times lately. His wife was back in for another operation. Fortunately the tumour was benign, and she is at home recovering. I want to wish them all the best as they move forward. I know everybody agrees with that.

There is a tremendous demand around the country for Canadian product. The member opposite also talked about some of the trials and tribulations we faced due to the system in the U.S. with our calf. As opposition, we sought intervener status in that situation. We were granted status, and we were down there to make the points we needed to make.

We are making changes, too, as we move forward to financing for young farmers. There has not been any substantive programming out there. Farm Credit Canada, a division of Agriculture Canada and an arm's-length crown corporation, has a package that is quite good and works well, but it does not have the depth that is needed. It is looking at doing more and more. I have had those discussions with Greg Stewart.

We are in the process of making changes to the old Farm Improvement and Marketing Cooperatives Loans Act. The name is new and the programming is new. About \$1 billion over the next few years will be available to new and beginning farmers. It has never been there before.

We have cut the down payment to 10% from 20%. We have expanded the loan values from \$250,000 cap to \$500,000, which will help with succession planning. The member also rightly points out that we have changed the capital gains allowance so that dad can take a larger capital gains exemption, sell out to the son, or daughter, or son-in-law or daughter-in-law and he or she can make use of the new money that is available under FIMCLA.

It is a good all around program. It is the type of thing we see to backstop the future of farming. Agriculture, like any business, is a cash flow business.

Mr. Chair, you know that. You have had boots on the ground and farms in your area as do we. Farmers will tell us that they need access to credit. They are quite happy to take on debt. It has to be good debt. We have done that with them with cash advances, where the first \$100,000 is interest free.

Farming is in great shape in our great country. Under our guidance and working with them, we will continue to build a stronger agricultural sector.

• (2120)

Mr. Larry Miller: Mr. Chair, another thing I know the minister has been working on is opening markets. I mentioned some of that in my remarks. I know that fight is ongoing.

Business of Supply

Could the minister tell us what other markets he has in his scope? Maybe he cannot share everything with us for various reasons, but maybe he could talk a bit about that and some of the advantages to not only the livestock industry but to the grains, durum wheat and that kind of thing.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, as I said, my responsibility is a pleasure, but it is also a pleasure to be out selling Canadian product around the world.

We are taking industry with us. We are not arbitrarily making up these lists or the countries we are visiting. We are working from lists that have been supplied to us by the Canadian cattlemen, by the pulse growers, by the canola councils and so on.

They point out where they think there is an opportunity. They point out where they have had some gains, but need to expand those markets. We are going country by country from their lists to ensure we can expedite those types of situations and get more product into their countries.

Mr. Francis Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Chair, would the minister answer a few simple questions on the estimates.

First, is the number \$220,466,000 less than the number \$236,848,000, yes or no?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I have to get my calculator out for numbers that big, but it certainly looks like less to me.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Mr. Chair, sorry what was the answer?

The Chair: The hon. minister can answer the question again.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, absolutely.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Mr. Chair, I am reading those numbers in association with the estimates for Agriculture and Agri-Food under program by activities and those numbers are from the line item food safety and nutrition risks. That number \$220,466,000 is in association with the budget estimate for 2009-10.

The number \$236,848,000 is in association with the previous year's budget, 2008-09. So would the minister not agree that there is less money being budgeted for food safety and nutrition risks in this year's budget than last year's budget?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, no absolutely not. He can pick a one line item out and make a comparison, but looking at the overall budget, the CFIA for food safety in its programming has the largest budget it has ever received in the last two years. The department the same because we do things a little differently. It is not line-by-line. It is the fulsomeness of the overall package that is available for Canadian consumers.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Mr. Chair, those numbers are in association with a single line item, food safety nutrition risks.

I would like to ask the minister, would he agree that the number \$136 million is less than \$335 million?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I should have spent more time in high school. These numbers are astounding. Of course, it is a smaller number.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Mr. Chair, if I said to the minister that those numbers are in association with another line item, contributions in support of those initiatives that contribute to the

improvement, advancement and promotion of the federal inspection system, and that \$136 million was the estimate for this year's budget, 2009-10, and the number \$335 million is in association with last year's budget, 2008-09, would the minister agree with me that there is less being spent in this budget than the last budget in support of initiatives for the promotion of federal inspection?

• (2125)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, absolutely not. What the member opposite is doing is perverting the numbers. Certainly, there are programs—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Gerry Ritz: It's my time, is it not? Okay?

When it is compared line-by-line, certainly there will be changes as we change the system. The overall budget to CFIA has gone up. There are more inspectors. There is more money to do a better job. That is what we continue to do. The member opposite can cherry-pick line-by-line, but at the end of the day the job CFIA is asked to do is bigger, the budgets are bigger, and the inspector numbers are growing. That is the bottom line.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Mr. Chair, I am reading the very numbers that the minister himself produced in his own budget.

A question asked earlier by one of our colleagues from Quebec was skilfully evaded by the minister, so I will repeat the question in the hope that he will answer it directly.

During the 2008 election campaign, the Prime Minister committed \$500 million over four years to create an agriculture flexibility program to help farmers build flexible programs to meet their local needs, but once elected, in budget 2009, the Conservatives only announced \$190 million over five years. Why did the government break its promise?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, a promise made to deliver a \$500 million agricultural flexibility program. Promise delivered. The money has been reworked in programs that are not meeting the target. The old government was great at promising big money that never was triggered out. We will not do that. We are not scared to back up and take a look at it, and make sure this is not being funnelled out.

I made the point earlier that certain sectors of these line items always change. They always will and what we deliver is a better program for agricultural producers in this country.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Mr. Chair, I am with the member for Vancouver Quadra and the member for Charlottetown. Do I have one more question?

The Chair: If you take one more question, you will be taking time from your other colleagues.

Business of Supply

The hon. member for Vancouver Quadra.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Chair, the Pesticide Management Regulatory Agency, PMRA, is years behind in its job of taking older, higher impact pesticides off the market and approving new, lower impact pesticides.

Has the minister any work he can show or any funds invested to help the PMRA speed up its process of pesticide regulation?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, the member opposite would know that PMRA is actually a division of Health Canada not Agriculture Canada.

Through growing forward and now through agricultural flexibility, we will be able to move forward to do the background checks and work with industry on the program to make sure it gets access to the new innovative ways of pesticides and chemicals. We are happy to do that.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Chair, I take it the answer to my question was no.

A recent report has raised serious concerns about groundwater quality in Canada. It described a major threat to groundwater as being intensification of agriculture.

What is the minister's position on the role of intensified agriculture production as a source of contamination for our nation's groundwater?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I am not sure what the member did not get in the last submission I made. I said that we would be happy to work with PMRA, to spend money under growing forward and agriculture flexibility to make sure that producers have access to new and better pesticides that will actually be better for our groundwater. We are doing that.

We have also done pilot projects. That moves the agricultural system back from groundwater. We have done that. We will continue to work with the provinces because this is more under their jurisdiction than ours.

We are all concerned about the contamination of anything, including groundwater. My department takes that seriously. We work with PMRA to that end.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Chair, I also did not get an answer to that question of the role of intensified agricultural production on contamination of groundwater. As we know, groundwater contamination was responsible for seven deaths and 2,300 illnesses directly from agricultural sources like manure.

The minister does not apparently care much about the environment, but he does claim to care about farmers. Our farmers produce high quality food with high standards and high environmental standards, yet pesticides that are not allowed on our products here, particularly ones that are harmful to handlers, are allowed in the United States and Mexico.

What is the minister doing to ensure that products using those pesticides are not allowed into Canada?

• (2130)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, we have a good solid set of rules. Products are checked at the border. Things that would contaminate

Canadian produce are not allowed here. We do work on a case by case basis to make sure that what is coming in meets Canadian standards. We continue to work with regulatory agencies around the world to build a better food safety system.

I am not sure where the member opposite is coming from. In 2009-10 we will spend some \$180 million on the environment through Agriculture Canada. We continue to foster a better environment.

I totally agree with her that our producers are stewards of the land. They do a fantastic job and will continue to do so with the help of my department giving them access to new and improved pesticides and chemicals.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Chair, the farmers I am referring to feel that they are being asked to compete with their hands tied behind their backs on a completely unlevel playing field. Products are allowed into Canada that have pesticides harmful to handlers. Funding for CFIA has been reduced so there are fewer inspectors inspecting the products. It is farmers themselves who believe that there is no level playing field, and the minister appears to be dismissing that.

There are farmers who have been asking for help based on a very positive pilot project undertaken by the Liberals to see whether the set-asides of farmland for habitat and protecting of biodiversity could contribute to the common good. The answer was yes. Farmers have been asking for support for this program.

Is the minister aware of it at all? If so, why has the government done absolutely nothing to support these farmers?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I would have the member opposite have those farmers call me. We will certainly work with them on a case by case basis. If they are facing a situation that is unfair in their estimation, we will work to level that.

The member opposite would also know that the residue levels that she is talking about are set by Health Canada not by us. CFIA makes sure that the products that come in meet Canada health safety standards.

She also talked about changes to CFIA budgeting. I can assure her that for the last two budget years the moneys for CFIA have gone up. The largest budgets in its history happened in the last two budgetary years and will continue. The main estimates are only one part of the funding for CFIA. There are supplementary estimates that flow as it works on a case by case basis on issues that pop up.

Business of Supply

Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Chair, in January, the minister announced on behalf of the Government of Canada an investment of \$6 million to Atlantic beef capacity in Atlantic Canada at the Borden-Carleton plant. There has been some confusion in this investment. I just want to confirm for the record that this is a grant and the money has been received.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, as I understand it, we have signed off as a government on that money to flow. The province of P.E.I. and the other Atlantic regions are reassessing how they want to handle this. I cannot speak to the holdup in the delivery of the money. We have signed off on it. It is ready to go. It is out of our hands.

As far as I am concerned, it is in the hands of ABP. They have not gotten it yet because the provinces are taking a second look at it. That is the best I can tell him.

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Chair, it is a grant for sure and he is waiting for some conditions precedent on the money to flow. That is for sure.

The Minister of Finance announced in the budget that there would be a \$50 million investment in slaughter capacity. That was budget 2009. Will the minister confirm for the Canadian public that this is also a grant?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, the member opposite should have been here sooner. He should have listened to my last response. These are repayable contributions in both cases. The repayment terms are based on the sustainability of whichever facility these moneys go to. We will work out those terms on a sustainability profit line basis. The future looks bright.

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Chair, that is certainly not what the minister was saying back in November 2007. However, that is his statement right now.

The last time the minister's department was before the public accounts committee, a number of his employees were moonlighting to process claims before the respective agencies. Over the next day or two, they were adjudicating these claims. Can he confirm that has been stopped?

• (2135)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, absolutely.

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Chair, one of the issues that I have always been concerned about is this at-risk or performance pay for senior executives. It is hard to determine in the estimates where it is and how much it is? Could you tell us for the record just what percentage of your senior executives get this at-risk or performance pay and what is the average payment? It is not disclosed anywhere I can see.

The Chair: I will just remind members again to ask questions through the Chair and not directly to other members.

The hon. Minister of Agriculture.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I can assure the member opposite that those are done in the department outside of my purview. Of course, having said that, there are Treasury Board rules and regulations in place and those are always followed.

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Chair, my point is that it is not discernible for any member of Parliament reading the estimates. Can the minister provide us with some undertaking that he will get back to us with the averages? I am not looking for individual payments. I am looking for what the average is and the percentage that get it.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, we will certainly compile that list and provide it for the member.

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Chair, the minister is responsible for the Canadian Pari-Mutual Agency. There has been some concern that this agency does not have the capacity to deal with emerging drugs and technologies. That is of some concern in the industry. Does the minister agree with that concern?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, there are new and better ways to make horses run faster. Of course, we look at those on a case-by-case basis. I know I have signed off on several new sets of regulations just in the last months. We will continue to analyze and work forward.

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Chair, I did not detect an answer there, but I will go to the regulations. There has been talk for a number of years on these regulations that are supposed to come forward. Can the minister indicate where they stand right now?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, the member opposite would have to be a little more specific. I am not sure which bundle of regulations he is talking about. There are a number of proposals coming forward. We are working with the industry to better the whole facility and we will continue to do that.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Chair, I appreciate the opportunity to speak tonight.

I want to begin by giving the minister a well-deserved thanks from not only my constituents in Lambton—Kent—Middlesex but from those in this great country of Canada.

I want to take the opportunity to speak a bit about the listeriosis outbreak that happened in August 2008. First, I will put forward a few facts about what happened.

Regardless of where we are in this House, a tragedy happened and, in all fairness, our thoughts and prayers go out to the families and friends of those who have been affected by that outbreak.

In terms of the listeria, it is important to understand that the Canadian food safety system is a multi-faceted system, extending over several government departments and agencies and through provincial and municipal governments.

No single arm of government acts alone in situations like the listeriosis outbreak we experienced last summer. An effective response requires first-class systems, flawless collaboration and communication between various agencies and across jurisdictions. Certainly the listeriosis outbreak of 2008 informed the government that it needed to strengthen its policies and its activities around the issues of listeria in food and the health risks it poses to Canadians.

Business of Supply

There were also lessons to be learned about providing a tightly integrated response when several organizations at different levels of government need to coordinate with each other.

I will give a brief timeline of the events of last summer related to this outbreak. I will follow that by letting members know what the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which I will refer to as CFIA, and its government partners have done since to strengthen our food safety system with regard to listeria.

When the outbreak was identified by the Public Health Agency of Canada last summer, CFIA worked closely with the agency, Health Canada, provincial authorities, local units of public health and the private sector.

CFIA was first apprised of the situation on August 6, 2008. It was only then that the Toronto Public Health Unit informed the CFIA of two listeriosis illness cases at a Toronto nursing home. It also had preliminary lab results indicating listeria present in the food that had been served at that same location.

From that point onward, CFIA's Office of Food Safety and Recall led around-the-clock food safety investigations to see if there was a link between the listeriosis illness in Toronto and any commercially distributed food.

During the food safety investigation, CFIA worked with its partners at the federal, provincial and public health unit levels, collecting evidence that allowed them to make the link between the contaminated food and the listeriosis illness.

Early on August 17, 2008, based on information and guidance provided by CFIA, Maple Leaf Foods started to a recall on ready-to-eat meat products produced at that plant. Additional food safety investigations resulted in an expanded voluntary recall of other products from the very same plant. The recall for this outbreak represents one of the largest in recent Canadian history.

In addition to its magnitude, the recall was complex, requiring an extensive effort with respect to product traceability and coordination with government partners and industry.

The process involved included: a sampling blitz, with some 348 sample units being tests; 192 Maple Leaf products recalled; and approximately 30,000 recall effectiveness checks completed nationwide. I think that in itself indicates the complexity of what a recall involves.

• (2140)

CFIA conducted operational reviews after the listeriosis outbreak of 2008. Many aspects of the agency's response were reviewed, including how it communicated and coordinated internally. It also analyzed its collaboration with federal partners, other levels of government and industry. It reviewed how it engaged with the Canadian public and the industry.

Beyond communication and coordination, the agency also reviewed its activities at the Maple Leaf plant at Bartor Road. It reviewed inspection records and actions prior to the outbreak and its subsequent investigative activities there.

As the House may be aware, both CFIA and Maple Leaf investigations pinpointed biological material deep inside the slicers

at plant 97B as breeding grounds for listeria as the root cause for the outbreak. As soon as this was confirmed, CFIA immediately gave directives to industry for new deep sanitizing procedures for slicers and has subsequently introduced mandatory environmental testing for listeria.

What many Canadians might not know is that Canada used to have a mandatory environmental testing regime prior to 2005. In that year, when the member for Malpeque was parliamentary secretary to the minister of agriculture and the member for St. Paul's was the minister of state for the Public Health Agency of Canada in the last government, environmental testing was cut. It was simply put to an end.

We learned from Michael McCain last month at the subcommittee that despite the Liberal government's cancellation of mandatory environmental testing for listeria, Maple Leaf was taking voluntary tests. Mr. McCain testified that Maple Leaf had some positive listeria tests results beginning in May 2008, leading up to the outbreak in August of 2008.

Under the law then there was no legal obligation to report these results to CFIA. It simply filed the results away in a binder.

I want to read what Dr. Brian Evans, Canada's chief veterinary officer, told our subcommittee on listeria what this resulted in. In his opening remarks about environmental testing, he said:

This is important, because looking at aggregate environmental tests over a period of time will provide us with early warning of potential problems so that corrective actions can be taken before a positive test is found in food.

Dr. Evans was very clear that with a history of positive environmental tests, CFIA may have been able to determine problems before something went wrong. It may not have known the specific cause of what was wrong but it would have been in a position to investigate proactively rather than during an outbreak.

Simply put, without reporting the test results to CFIA, the regulatory agency could not have foreseen the tragic outbreak of last year.

All witnesses have agreed that if Maple Leaf's positive environmental test results had been communicated to CFIA prior to July 2008, alarm bells would have rung and this outbreak may have been prevented.

Yes, environmental testing for listeria was eliminated in 2005. Thankfully, however, our Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board has taken steps to undo the mistake of the previous government and has ordered that environmental testing and reporting for listeria become mandatory.

The Conservative government has initiated a stringent environmental testing regime which is now mandatory for industry and CFIA to test and analyze results immediately. These regulations became effect April 1.

Business of Supply

● (2145)

I have a question that I would like to put to the minister, if I may. After hearing the results of what happened and understanding a bit about the complexity of it, I believe it is imperative that the minister tell the House and Canadians what our government has done and what steps we have taken to help restore the confidence in food safety in this great country.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, there is not a day that goes by that we do not go back and retrospectively have a look at what was done and how it was done. Our thoughts and prayers remain with the victims of that listeria outbreak.

We agree with the member in his presentation that when this began we were looking for a needle in a haystack. My congratulations go out to the CFIA teams and the public health teams, both federally and provincially, that did yeoman service throughout that stressful time and continue to seek a better way to do this. We have analyzed and found the root cause but no one can guarantee that this will never happen again. We are hopeful that we can limit it, that we can get on top of it quicker and that there will never be this severe an impact. We are pledged to do that.

This really tested the mettle of the complete Canadian system. What this brought to the forefront and what we learned, which has already been applied with H1N1, is far better communication and coordination among everyone involved. I think we have seen that borne out as we came to grips with H1N1. It continues to unfold and that compatibility of programming and so on is being redesigned and redeveloped.

To that end, we as a federal government have reinvigorated our efforts under both product and health, in both Health Canada and the CFIA, to reinvigorate the number of inspectors and the volumes of money that will be allocated in budgets. We look forward to a compilation of the lessons learned reports that we have already seen, plus the independent investigation led by Sheila Weatherall. It will give us a better indication of gaps that we may have missed to this point that we can again address by human and budgetary resources. We certainly pledge to do that.

We are quite excited by the tremendous work done by Sheila Weatherall. She has the capacity, knowledge and tools at her disposal to come forward with a great report. I look forward to that coming up in July and to continuing the great work that has been started and will continue to be done by the CFIA.

● (2150)

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Chair, the minister just touched on this at the end of his response, which is the independent investigation and Ms. Weatherall. There has been some discussion over her selection, particularly by members of the opposition party who tried to discredit her credibility and the work she is doing. They have tried to discredit the minister as being interfering but then, in the next turn, say that the minister will not talk to her or has not talked to her.

In fact, over the last few days opposition members have said that they are actually on a fishing trip. I think what Canadians want is for Ms. Weatherall to have the opportunity to come forward with her recommendations and get to the bottom of this situation that came about last August. I am wondering if the minister could help

Canadians and those of us here understand the credibility and the qualifications that this lady has to bring to that investigation.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, the member makes a good point. The qualifications and character of Ms. Weatherall are beyond reproach. She has done an impeccable job in running one of the largest health units in Canada very credibly. She is bringing that type of attitude to this investigation.

I had the great opportunity to be interviewed by her. I look forward to a return trip if it is required by her. We will wait and see how that goes. She has had tremendous response and great cooperation from all parties involved. There has not been one instance where she has said that she has not had exactly what she has asked for or has been made available to her. I think that is a good indication that everyone, including industry and government agencies, want to get to the bottom of this. We will and we will build our system even better.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Chair, I noticed the minister's comments earlier about Alberta sugar perhaps going somewhere to help with the peaches. I would ask him two questions around labelling and peaches. Sugar is needed in canning clingstone peaches. The problem of course with the clingstone peaches is we do not have a canner because the last canner east of the Rocky Mountains closed a little over a year ago. Consequently those peach growers in the Niagara region do not need sugar because they do not have a canner. So it really does not matter whether sugar was going to take the labelling beyond the 95% to 98% when it would not be called a product of Canada. We just do not can peaches in this country because there is nowhere to can them. If they get canned it will be in the United States and clearly that will not be a product of Canada as it comes back through. That becomes problematic.

Do we see any programs coming down to restore the cannery and restore canneries east of the Rocky Mountains again, so indeed tender fruit croppers can eventually stay in business? They are going to go out of business.

The other part to that question is about labelling. In the wine industry we have two products in the Niagara Peninsula. One is called cellared in Canada and one is called VQA. The VQA is the vintner's quality alliance, while cellared in Canada for most consumers assumes that it is made here, but that is the furthest thing from the truth. We have products that cannot say product of Canada, when indeed they have only a marginal amount of foreign content, and we have a product cellared in Canada that basically is wholly produced elsewhere. The juice that comes in from Chile, Argentina and Australia is put in a bottle and it is labelled as cellared in Canada.

Could the minister address those two issues?

Business of Supply

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, certainly we are concerned when a processor moves out of the country too because it takes away from a top quality Canadian product. We have programs that are available to re-stimulate that should producers decide they want to do that. With the changes that we have made under, and I will still call it FIMCLA because that is what it is, we do not have that bill passed yet, under that program and the new version of that under the cooperative side, producers can go together. They can borrow up to \$3 million backed by the federal government with 51% producer control. They have to be in the driver's chair. Forty-nine per cent could then be added to by outside investors and so on, the community and whatever, to reignite that peach factory. That is a great opportunity to do that.

Having said that, we are also looking at agri-flex. There are positions in that when we talk about innovation, value added processing that we can work with producers to re-stimulate that type of a market. I am quite excited by that. The member opposite is right to point out that we need to retain those types of situations in Canada and get them back working here with Canadian jobs.

When it comes to the wine, that is a situation we are working on with the Canadian Vintners Association. Norm Beal is the president. We have had a couple of meetings so far. We are talking about that. We are working along those lines. I agree that consumers have the right and the need to know where that product comes from.

• (2155)

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Chair, we would like to see the cannery. The building still exists and perhaps we can see that fired up again for the Niagara producers.

Let us move on to something else. Last year Mr. Paul Mayers, the acting VP for programs at CFIA told reporters on August 28 that 175 new meat inspectors were hired from March 2006 to March 2008. The day before at a press conference to discuss the listeriosis outbreak, the minister himself said, "there have been some 200 inspectors added to the lines of CFIA over the past two years of this government and we have another 58 that we brought on board before the end of this fiscal year". That was on August 27, 2008. A few months later the minister said, "Between March 2006 and March 2008 we hired 200 food safety inspection personnel and an additional 87 food safety personnel have been added in the past year". That statement was made on February 28, 2009 to the subcommittee.

What I have a problem with is the numbers. They do not add up. Initially the CFIA vice president said 175, the minister said 200 and then said there were another 58, then later on he went on to say there were 200 and then there were 87. The problem is in the subcommittee when I asked the vice-president, Mr. Cameron, could he give me the number, he could not. When I asked if he would send me the number, he said he would and of course we still have not received the number.

It seems to me the numbers have bounced all over the place and somebody really has a tough time with arithmetic because no one can actually add them up and make them come out to what they truly are.

I wonder if the minister can actually clarify all of these numbers and tell me how many meat inspectors, not inspectors, but meat

inspectors were actually hired and put on the front line from 2006 to the present day?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, it is always difficult to quantify those numbers. It depends on a given day. The workforce is mobile. It depends on who is asked and when it is asked.

I can assure the member that the global number of CFIA employees and front-line inspectors has gone up by some 14% under our tutelage, and we continue to add to that number. The budgets are there to do that. Of course we want qualified people. This is not something that people are hired off the street to do. We continually head hunt for those people.

We are in the neighbourhood of 3,228 inspectors. I have seen numbers that roughly half of those are involved in meat, but of course that number expands and contracts as plants change. We have the unfortunate situation where a plant in Saskatchewan right now has closed its doors for a short time, XL meat processors in Saskatchewan. Right now a number of inspectors have been transferred to other facilities. That number is in flux at all times.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Chair, the fact that we cannot have a determined number absolutely escapes me. In most industries I have ever been involved with there is always an ability to head count. The problem the CFIA has when it comes to its meat inspection system is that the CFIA cannot quantify it. Yet we are supposed to trust it with the safety of our food products.

The other evening the Canadian Meat Council suggested that "CFIA inspectors need to have regular consistent training".

The Canadian Meat Council said, "It was evident to us after the new listeriosis control policy was implemented on April 1, 2009 that many inspectors didn't know enough about proper aseptic sampling techniques".

We heard about that in the paper, and I believe the CFIA discontinued doing it for a period of time.

Will we provide the resources to enable the CFIA to make sure that the testing procedures that it needs to complete get done? If it indeed involves overtime, are we willing to pay it to get it done? Has it been completed as of now?

• (2200)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, let me see if I can get the order properly on that.

I am assured that the numbers of inspectors and the breakdowns have been sent to committee. If the information has not been received, maybe it is in translation, but I know it has gone to committee so the member for Welland will have that very soon.

CFIA inspectors, like anyone else in this changing environment, are constantly trained and retrained. The numbers shift; there are capacity shifts depending on where they are in that retraining process.

Business of Supply

On the specific issue he talked about, yes, it is nearing completion as I understand. Dr. Brian Evans is assuring me that those projects continue to move forward and that we are making great headway on them.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Chair, I appreciate that response.

Hopefully when it comes to those changes at the CFIA they are not moving at the same speed that Mr. Kyte mentioned last night when referring to the regulations. He suggested that they move like glaciers. Hopefully the training will move a lot faster than a glacier.

The minister did raise the XL plant, so let me go to that. As we know, in less than 40 days the Competition Bureau actually approved the sale of the Tyson beef packing plant to XL. Now that XL has closed, the only major beef packing plant between Toronto and central Alberta reminds me of the cannery in St. Davids that closed, the last one east of the Rockies. It just seems to be going the other way, westward.

The CCA says that the closure may be permanent. “We’re not certain”, the CCA’s research arm, CanFax, is quoted as saying “The closure will lower prices for both fed and non-fed cattle”. That was in the April 30 issue of *The Western Producer*. CCA’s CanFax also said of the closure, “We’re reducing capacity and the plants don’t have to go out there and be quite as aggressive on their bids to procure cattle”.

The question really is, did we know this? Did we know that the Tyson-XL sale would lead to less aggressive bidding and lower cattle prices? Is that not what the Competition Bureau really should have been looking at in the first place to ensure that it did not happen?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, there are certainly a number of factors that are negatively affecting livestock at this time.

I happened to have a chance to read the CanFax report today, the new *Western Producer* issue is out. It reports that there has been no negative impact on livestock pricing since XL announced its closure.

We are hoping that it is temporary. We are hoping that those situations are going to be worked out. I know they are pointing to a number of situations where they are putting their emphasis into the Tyson plant. I welcome that. I think it is great that it is now Canadian owned as opposed to American owned.

The Nilsson brothers, Brian, whom I know, also own a plant in Nebraska. They are constantly giving us instructions, direction and advice as to what they face with USDA with respect to the Nebraska plant and what they expect to see in the Tyson plant. They are willing to work with us as we move forward on SRM recapture and so forth.

At this point I can assure the member opposite that according to today’s release from CanFax, there has been no downturn in the pricing due to the XL closure.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Chair, I will move to agri-stability. The minister may have answered this before. The 2009 budget states:

The Government will also work with interested provinces toward devolution of delivery of the AgriStability program to support improved client service through wider integration and alignment with other business risk-management programs already delivered provincially. Integrated provincial program delivery would help ensure that the suite of programs meets producers’ needs.

Saskatchewan producers are saying that there seems to be a negative margin and negative margins do not work with agri-stability. That formula does not work for them. Is the government going to do something to address the agri-stability formula program? They are in a negative balance all the time. The program is not going to look at that except to say no, which means they are not really going to get out of debt.

If it is only going to be loans and they are already in debt, and all we are asking them is to take on more debt, do we have a plan to get them out of debt?

• (2205)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, a properly working market will get them out of debt.

The member opposite is mixing several situations. He talked about devolution. We are in discussions with Saskatchewan and B.C. I firmly believe that closer to the need is the best delivery mechanism, so I fully support that devolution. We are working toward that. It has been slowed down a little in B.C. because of the election, but now we will get back on track.

The member opposite should also know that the delivery of agri-stability is a joint responsibility between the federal government and provincial and territorial governments. We have discussions by conference calls. I had one last week with my colleagues. We are having another one in July which will assess the first year of agri-stability. We will talk about what works and what does not work. We will have those numbers.

Because of the large acreage and the tremendous amount of agriculture in Saskatchewan, it is always one of the large beneficiaries of any program, including agri-stability. We have the numbers as to the payments that have gone to Saskatchewan and I can get them for the member.

In situations where there are negative margins and situations where farmers have multiple years that are keeping them out of triggering a payment, we make an advance payment to them. That goes against future payments that we think may come to them. They have that cash flow to keep them liquid and they will be paid back as they trigger payments in the future. That is the best of all worlds in the situation the member opposite is talking about.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Chair, it is interesting to hear the minister say that the markets will get them out of debt.

I do not have as many cattle producers or hog producers in my neck of the woods as members out west do, but nearly all of them are saying the same thing. They are not making any money at this. They are all losing money, yet the response is always that the market will get them out of it. So far the market has not done them any good. We have expanded markets and they just keep losing more money.

Hog producers were in the Senate courtyard recently. The president of the Ontario Pork Producers told me that he does not need another loan. He needs money.

The minister said there may be challenges at the WTO. The WTO is not going to save our hog farmers if we just—

Business of Supply

The Chair: Order. I am going to have to cut off the hon. member to allow the minister a few seconds for a very brief response.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, it is always dangerous to make a blanket statement that everybody is in trouble. That is not the case. There is a growing number of livestock producers who are actually seeing some light at the end of the tunnel. I know that is a well-worn cliché, but it is absolutely true.

There are some problems in the hog sector. We continue to work with that sector and with the provinces and territories to come up with a program that will not be challenged, that will serve their best interests, and continue to open those markets for them.

Mr. Andrew Kania (Brampton West, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I will be sharing my time with the member for Avalon and the member for Malpeque.

I would like to review four areas with the minister. The first one is organic food.

As the minister is aware, there are divergent standards between what Canada requires and what the Americans require. I am wondering if the minister has any plans to do something about that to bring some form of harmonization so that first of all, we know that what is coming into our country is actually certified as organic and second, that we are able to export and help our producers bring those products to the United States.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: That is a great question, Mr. Chair, because the organic sector is growing. We are looking at standardization of those rules and regulations. We have just developed a new organic logo, working with the affected producers. We are moving ahead with a new benchmark. This whole idea of self-accreditation is no longer on the table, and we are asking that of our import-export situations as well.

What we need is a level playing field in organics, the same as we see in other industries. We will continue to work with our import sector, as well as our export sector, to make sure that there is accreditation that is based on sound science and continues to serve the industry and consumers well.

● (2210)

Mr. Andrew Kania: Mr. Chair, continuing with organics, I am also interested in making sure that there is meaningful supervision to ensure that people do not just slap labels on products and call them organic.

What I would like to know is whether the minister thinks what we currently have is adequate and what might be considered for the future.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, we will continue to work with industry on that particular situation. We want to make sure that what is labelled organic can be proved to be organic, and we will continue to work with the industry to that end.

Mr. Andrew Kania: Mr. Chair, I want to discuss the health of food items, and specifically animals with respect to hormones. In Canada, we allow the use of bovine growth hormones, which are banned in the EU. My question is, what is the most recent scientific information that the Canadian government has in terms of the use of growth hormones in animals in Canada and specifically how they relate to food consumption and health issues?

Subject to what the minister might tell the House in terms of what the most recent studies are, my next question will be, will the minister commission a recent study to actually show, based on the most recent scientific evidence possible, and frankly, capabilities, what is healthy, what is not healthy and what we should be allowing at this stage by way of growth hormones in any type of animal for consumption?

The Chair: I should remind members again to address their remarks through the chair and not directly to members.

The hon. minister.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, we do not want to leave you out. We know you are important here.

These are great questions from the member for Brampton West. We actually have an implant system for animal hormones. I know the EU talks about hormones. We have actually banned rBST, and so on. The Americans have not; we have. The arguments were just levelled in our favour with the EU ban, because we have been able to prove that we do not use what it says we did.

That said, everything we allow or not allow is based on sound scientific testing. We continue to do that on a case-by-case basis, depending on what pops up. We constantly commission scientific studies to look for the impacts of those types of situations. I am sure we could provide a list of websites, or whatever, to check. I see Dr. Evans nodding his head. We could get those, should the member require them.

They are peer reviewed. We recognize what the Americans have done, and they recognize what we have done. We work in collaboration with the EU, and so on. It is a global situation. That said, we want to make sure that the highest standards are what is recognized here in Canada.

We proved that point with the EU just lately, so we will actually have some money coming back to our livestock sector, because it held us out of its markets with some unsubstantiated scientific facts that were not true.

Mr. Andrew Kania: Mr. Chair, in addition, I have similar questions with respect to the use of antibiotics in animals.

When people go to the grocery store, they will see some producers advertise specifically “no use of antibiotics”, but other producers use them. I am wondering what the most recent scientific evidence that we are relying upon as Canadians happens to be in terms of what is safe or not safe, whether we should be allowing these antibiotics, and whether there is some form of deleterious effect that is occurring in the population with respect to perhaps humans not having the benefit of these various antibiotics because we are getting them in our food. So perhaps we are not able to get the same medical benefits from them.

Business of Supply

I am not a scientist, I am a lawyer, but I am wondering whether we should be considering this.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, we are crossing the line into what is more in Health Canada's bailiwick than mine. Certainly I could take that under advisement and forward it on to my colleague, the Minister of Health.

That said, everything that is done in Canada is based on scientific studies beforehand. We are not reactive in those situations. We want to make sure that the antibiotics used have no side effects or concerns whatsoever. We continue to make sure that our standard of care is beyond what is required.

Residue levels are monitored constantly. They are upgraded and standardized by Health Canada, as well as CFIA.

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Mr. Chair, earlier this evening the minister talked about keeping promises and that being a hallmark.

I have a question. In the last election, the Conservative Party promised to cut the excise tax on diesel by 2¢. It was not in budget 2009. It would be a great time to move forward with this for farmers and fishermen. When should we expect the implementation of that?

• (2215)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, we have actually done two things. Since then, we have cut the GST by 2¢, which is more than what we had pledged to do when it comes to fuel, simply by taking off the GST. We have since started working towards taking half the excise tax away on diesel fuel and we will continue to work on the rest.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Mr. Chair, this question is on the listeriosis crisis around election time. In regard to the handwritten notes that were tabled as documents with the subcommittee in reference to the PCO and the PMO, how frequent were the communications with the minister and the PMO and PCO?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, the committee received everything it asked for, and we are happy to do that. I can assure the hon. member that we had organizational meetings twice a day, I believe, where all the affected groups he has mentioned were included.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Mr. Chair, my next question to the minister is this: How often did the minister receive input from the PMO in reference to communications on the outbreak?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, there were no specific references to communications. Certainly we worked with public health, Health Canada, the PMO, PCO, my department, CFIA, and so on. As I said, it was twice a day. In the morning we analyzed what had come in overnight, and by noon we analyzed what had happened that day. The reporting structure was from the provinces, not us, so we had to do constant updates. Then we went out and met the press, pardon that pun, every day at about four o'clock. Dr. Evans was there every day with me as well.

We constantly had discussions around how to communicate to make sure that we were assuring Canadians that it was under control, that we were working towards that. Of course, we had statistics we had to relay each day, and we continued to do that.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Mr. Chair, in those handwritten notes about the outbreak, it was referred to that this was an election issue. What was meant by that?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I do not know who took those notes, but that never crossed my mind.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Mr. Chair, I am going to move on to the altered inspection reports. The minister told the media and others that he did not monitor the day-to-day operations of the CFIA. Could the minister please explain that?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I do not. I handled this question at committee. Cameron Prince, the director of operations for CFIA, did answer that question in that there were two inspectors involved on the plant floor. When the audit was done some months later, they went back and compared with the two inspectors and put everything down on one sheet. As he said, it was not a change or alteration of any kind; it was to make sure that all the information was on one sheet.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Mr. Chair, when the outbreak occurred and all this was going on, the minister was having day-to-day communications with PCO and the PMO. However, he did not have contact with the CFIA. Is that correct?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, no, not at all. We were all in the same room, around the boardroom table, discussing the issues and how we would move forward, what types of notification we would give to Canadians and how to assure them that the recall processes were going on. We made sure Canadians knew which products we were looking for and in which areas of the country. We got out as much information as we possibly could on a day-by-day basis.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have another question on listeriosis. The rendition given by the hon. member for Lambton—Kent—Middlesex leaves many open questions about environmental testing, but I will only ask one.

In a question from the parliamentary secretary at committee, and I quote:

In 2005...mandatory environmental testing was removed. Is that correct?

Dr. Evans replied:

At no time was there mandatory requirements for industry to do environmental testing.

The rendition from the hon. member for Lambton—Kent—Middlesex and the answer from Dr. Evans do not match. One is incorrect. Could the minister tell us which one it is?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, the hon. member for Malpeque is being a little bit mischievous, and he is quite good at it. What Dr. Evans said was that industry never was required to do mandatory testing, government was, and it was the government testing that was cancelled under the Liberal government.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Chair, the Liberal government asked for a pilot project to be done, and the minister knows it. Could the minister table that pilot project with the committee?

Business of Supply

I have a number of other questions.

We have determined thus far that the minister seems willing to leave hog producers to the ravages of an unbalanced marketplace; in other words, let them go broke. He has basically said here tonight that he is not going to consider ad hoc funding.

In answering the question with respect to the Prime Minister's commitment of \$100 million per year for cost of production, the minister confirmed that there has been no money paid out under that program. Therefore, the Prime Minister obviously broke his word.

He has confirmed that the government broke its election promise on AgriFlexibility, which was \$500 million over five years. It has now promised \$400 million over five years, but it is really only \$190 million in new money, and it is not allowing it to be used flexibly for the risk management program in Ontario, or ASRA in Quebec.

He confirmed that the \$12.4 million announced for the P.E.I. crop loss damage was only partially paid out and that the \$6 million committed to the Atlantic beef plant was not delivered. That is another broken promise.

With regard to the hogs and beef market, the minister is looking at new markets, and I have congratulated him for that. However, the most important market is the market we have. Do not lose it. What is the minister doing to try to keep the market we have in the United States? That is our most important market. When we lose it, it is gone. All the others will not make up for it.

• (2220)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, there are a number of issues there.

Certainly in our new suite of programs we are working to address cost of production, which made the straight cost of production program redundant. We even had the program in place last year, yet nobody could trigger it. It was not triggerable.

The last statistics I saw showed that Ontario only triggered \$2 million last year. If we did not want to send any money to farmers and we did not want to make farmers profitable, that is where I would park the money. We will not do that. We will make sure they get programs that will trigger and build a stronger market for them.

I can assure the hon. member that AgriInsurance has already paid out \$15 million to potato producers on P.E.I. AgriRecovery is paying out another \$1.4 million. We also have another program with the province that will trigger when potatoes are left in the field, which we asked them to do. It will pay out on potatoes that were put in storage and for the cleaning of those storage facilities. We are working on how we flow the full amount of money to the province. We fully intend to do that. We do not make false promises. We follow through.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Chair, the minister had better talk to some of those producers on P.E.I. The fact of the matter is that AgriRecovery money, which was supposed to be a disaster program, only covers the costs of getting rid of the product, whether they disc it down or get it out of the warehouse. That does not deal with the crop loss damage cost, which is loss of income to the tune of \$2,800 per acre. Those are the facts.

The fact of the matter is, though, that in the 2007 estimates, it was indicated—

The Chair: I will have to stop the hon. member there. There is only about 10 seconds left for the minister to respond, if he would like.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I will certainly take the last point under advisement. I could not hear it over all the hollering back and forth. We will check the transcripts and make sure we get back to the hon. member.

The member is setting aside the point that potato producers on P.E.I. received \$15 million of AgriInsurance. I am not sure how he is missing that.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Chair, despite some of the partisan bluster that goes on in the House from time to time, I would like to start my speech tonight by reiterating the minister's comments about our former agriculture chair, the member for Selkirk—Interlake, who is at home with his wife after surgery. I know that all members of the House have him and his family in their hearts and prayers.

I would also like to congratulate the Chair tonight. I understand that it was recently his birthday. Thirty more years and he will catch up to the member for Malpeque.

It has been real honour to serve on the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food for the last couple of years. Some of the finest people are on this committee, from the chairman and the parliamentary secretary to the committee members who showed their devotion to show up for countless hours of subcommittee and main committee, all trying to work for a better future for our farmers, both young and old.

That leads me to the discussion I would like to have tonight on an important issue that has become increasingly crucial to my constituents regarding honesty in product labelling and the criteria that must be met for an item to be given the product of Canada designation.

Product labelling affects the ability to market and sell most goods produced by farmers in all regions of Canada. I was proud to take the time to listen to hours of testimony and participate in debate last spring and fall listening to Canadians who were calling for immediate changes to the product of Canada labelling regulations.

Thankfully, on May 21, 2008, the Prime Minister unveiled the new food labelling initiative together with the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. In conjunction, they also launched the Canadian food and consumers safety action plan, which was committed to reviewing the policy on the use of product of Canada and made in Canada labelling claims on food labels and in advertising.

Business of Supply

These substantial changes to labelling will have a direct effect on the industry and, consequently, they sat down with many stakeholders and community groups who were affected by the proposed changes, to learn how they feel that will personally affect them.

Consumer groups, food processors and retailers, as well as farmers, have been consulted. Over 1,500 people completed an online survey about labelling legislation and many more called or wrote in to make sure their views were heard.

Overwhelmingly, the response was the same. Canadian stakeholders wanted and needed new labelling so that they know consumers can clearly and confidently identify their product as made in Canada or product of Canada.

In order to understand how important these changes are, one must take a look at the regulations before they were changed by the minister. They had nothing to do with food content and everything to do with the pricing formula, ensuring merely that 51% of the total content was produced or packaged in Canada.

During our consultations as a committee, however, time and time again industry and, in particular, Canadians consumers called this not only misleading, but borderline fraudulent. Consumer confidence is increased when they know they can count on the product to be Canadian made, locally grown and processed.

Many stakeholder groups that were consulted believed this would promote uniquely Canadian foods and build on the consumer desire to buy locally.

The policy on voluntary product of Canada claims on food products and advertising came into effect December 31, 2008. These specified that manufacturers would only be allowed to use product of Canada labels if all or virtually all of the contents were Canadian. The made in Canada label may be used if a food product is manufactured or processed in Canada, regardless of where the contents are from.

There are several different approaches to labelling product to help farmers and producers get their made in Canada message across without using those two terms but that still communicates to consumers their local Canadian base. A food product may claim the product of Canada term when all or virtually all major ingredients, processing and labour used to make the food product are from Canada. This means that all significant ingredients must be Canadian and non-Canadian material must be negligible.

This is what consumers and our producers were asking for. Ingredients that are present in a food at very low levels that are not generally produced in Canada, including spices, food additives and vitamins, may be used without disqualifying the food from making a product of Canada claim. Generally, the percentage referred to is very little or minor and is considered to be 2% or less.

• (2225)

The former food labelling guidelines had not been changed since the 1980s and we owe Canadians the best regulations possible. As the Prime Minister Harper said, "Our new guidelines are designed to redefine Canadian food content labels to better reflect the true origins of products in today's global marketplace".

Our government is tightening the definitions of these familiar labels so Canadians know exactly what they are getting and get exactly what they want.

The consumer support for this initiative has been overwhelming.

I would like to ask the minister to please comment on the benefits of the new product in Canada labelling.

• (2230)

The Chair: I would just remind members not to use proper names. Even though we are in committee of the whole, members still have to refer to colleagues by their riding or their title.

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Chair, as the member for Westlock—St. Paul said, it is an honour and a privilege to serve on the agriculture committee. I had the great opportunity to do that for a number of years and ended up chairing it over a couple of seasons. We worked very well and the member for Malpeque is giving me a compliment. I want that circled on the agenda because it just does not happen often.

When it comes to product of Canada, we were after a situation where the consumers were served in their best interests and also it helped Canadian producers to showcase their top quality products.

We started with a consultation phase over some months that saw some 1,500 interventions. Over 90% of them recommended the 98%. We built a very fulsome program that has been embraced by the vast majority of Canadian consumers and by the vast majority of Canadian processors.

They are struggling to come to that standard in a number of different ways. As I said earlier to some of the other interventions, we are seeing some great work done with 100% Canadian potatoes and then listing the other ingredients as well, but it lets people know that the base is 100% Canadian. I think that is an excellent opportunity to showcase all those different situations.

A 98% product of Canada is the ultimate marketing tool. It tells consumers that there is no concern. Everything is Canadian and it lives up to those very high standards that we enforce.

If we were to drop to lower standards, it would allow for the perversions that we used to see under the old rules where it was based on cost and not content. We want truth in labelling. We want a marketing tool that benefits consumers and benefits producers here in this country.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Chair, I would like to switch topics a little bit to talk about input costs.

Business of Supply

I see that the members of the official opposition actually found out today that we had a grower-requested own use program. I am not sure they understand the program itself. This is an issue with the OUI program that I have been working on for a couple of years trying to ensure that six million litres of product that is used through the own use import program by Saskatchewan and Alberta farmers, giving them a direct savings to their input costs, has been able to be continued.

I know that the minister was personally responsible for helping to keep that program alive until we got the GROU program up and running and a little bit more productive.

I would like an update from the minister on the grow program and I have a couple of questions for him. I would like to know how many pesticides are now eligible. When we first started this program there were many problems and could only get one or two pesticides through. How many pesticides can our producers now use?

I would also like to know what the minister is doing to decrease the time it takes to register a pesticide, as well as adding new pesticides. Is he still continuing to move toward adding new pesticides to the program for our producers?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, as our producers struggle with rising input costs, it is very beneficial to them to have access to other lines of product.

We saw the great work done to get generic glyphosate. As he said, several millions of litres that go through predominantly Saskatchewan and Alberta for the crops that we grow there have been a boon to those farmers. We have a few more of those registered now. Glyphosate was the only one registered under the OUI. Under the new growing forward there have been some 186 regulatory submissions. The list is getting shorter. We have 151 projects under way. We are now working in conjunction with some of our trading partners taking their science and adding to ours rather than starting at zero all the time.

We also, through the growing forward network of programming last year, funded some 30 different chemicals and pesticides and did a double flow with PMRA to speed up that regulatory registration process so that producers could have access to those new cost effective tools and better environmentally impacted tools that we can give them.

Under the new grow program, as the member said, it is grower requested. Therefore, we work through the system what producers want. That helps in keeping the queue down that we are working on the priorities for producers.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Chair, I would like to switch gears once more and talk about the farm improvement and marketing cooperatives loans act and a little bit about what happened today in committee.

We have had a history of this in our agriculture committee over the last couple of years. When it came to product of Canada labelling, on May 21 the member for Malpeque was putting his own press releases out and taking credit for it. Now he is in committee attacking it. It is tough to get where he is at on these issues. However, I understood that the official opposition was in favour of

Bill C-29, the farm improvement and marketing cooperatives loans act.

This is a very important piece of legislation to my farmers. It would give them access to the credit they need to be able to grow, to expand and sometimes just survive these troubling times. Even during the week, I thought we had unanimous consent to move this legislation forward quickly. Today in committee, when the government side requested to put forward a report that the Canadian Wheat Board admits it has and supposedly has no problem tabling with the public, the official opposition, led by the member for Malpeque, stalled, stammered and at the end of the day just walked out of the room on us, not allowing us to move forward with the legislation.

In fact, at one point he even threatened to delay our legislation until late next spring simply because his ego was bruised that we might ask for a report tabled to be made public on the Canadian Wheat Board's loss of over \$300 million of western Canadian money.

Could the minister tell the House what the Liberals have to hide when it comes to the Canadian Wheat Board? Will the minister commit to continuing to push the opposition to move this legislation forward, even with the Liberals now stonewalling at the committee?

● (2235)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I was not at committee so I cannot comment on what went on. I am certain that everybody can read the transcript if they want to know what happened.

However, I am sure cooler heads will prevail. As I said in my opening statements, everyone here has the best interests of farmers at heart. We may disagree on how we deliver those programs but at the end of the day we all know it needs to be done. The changes to the FIMCLA and bringing it up to date are very important.

Agriculture is a capital-intensive business. We all recognize the fact that most farmers out there are approaching retirement age and are looking to move their enterprise on to a son, daughter, daughter-in-law, son-in-law or a neighbour for that matter but they need access to credit to do that. The new proposal is all about modernizing that particular act to trigger roughly another billion dollars over the next few years so that beginning farmers can actually have a chance to take over dad's farm like I was able to do.

My son will not have that opportunity because of the changes that I have made in my life. He has gone on to work in the oil patch. This is such a capital-intensive business that he will not get his opportunity. We are saddened by that because he would have been the fifth generation farming and that would have been fantastic to see. However, we have gotten beyond that but we are here to help other people to have those opportunities.

I am quite excited by the changes that we have made. Beginning farmers will have access to some \$500,000, which is double what they used to have, with a 10% down payment rather than 20%. That loan, being backstopped by the federal government, will be at a preferred rate. We will ensure that the banks, credit unions and so on acknowledge that and work fairly with farmers when it comes to those loans.

Business of Supply

I am quite excited by it and I think the members opposite will come to grips with that too. We did have an example earlier about moneys going into a cooperative type of situation. I think it is time to reinvent that so we can get on top of some of these input costs and so on.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Malo (Verchères—Les Patriotes, BQ): Mr. Chair, my thanks to all our colleagues for coming together this evening to take part in the debate in committee of the whole with the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food. I thank him also for his presence, and for taking part in this extremely important exercise. I hope that when I have finished all my questions I will still be in a good mood. I also hope that the answers he will give me will be satisfactory to the potato growers in my region, who have been waiting a long time for answers.

When the Canadian Food Inspection Agency came to their farms during the summer and fall of 2006, they were told to be cooperative and to work with the agency. They were told not to be apprehensive, because the agency was there to help them. They had hopes of a solution, despite the fact that on October 12, 2006, the area surrounding Saint-Amable was declared a regulated zone. They knew this had to be done and they accepted it gracefully, because they were well aware that the border needed to be reopened. They were wholehearted in their solidarity with all the other growers so that trade could continue.

Nevertheless, they suffered some setbacks, since things were not resolved right away. However, on November 22, 2006, the parliamentary secretary to the previous minister said that the problem facing the producers in Saint-Amable would be resolved. A year later, I had to raise the issue again. Once again, I had to ask questions. That time, the Secretary of State (Agriculture), who is now the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, told us, “Things are going well with the producers. We are talking and a plan is being implemented as we speak.” That was October 26, 2007.

The situation is still unresolved today. Potato producers in Saint-Amable are still wondering if anyone on the other side of the House is listening to them and if the government is going to do something. Since they are watching us on television at this time, I hope they will be able to hear the minister's answers.

The situation was not resolved and an election was called. The hon. member for Mégantic—L'Érable said that it would be discussed among the ministers and that a resolution was not far off. We were told not to worry, that it would come. Once again, nothing happened. At the end of April, that is, a few days ago, when the minister announced his new agricultural policy in Sainte-Croix de Lotbinière, the hon. member for Jonquière—Alma, who is also the Minister of State (Agriculture), said that something would now be done. He said that by the end of May an agreement would be presented that would meet the producers' expectations.

I have a question for the minister. Will the producers really see a satisfactory agreement by the end of May?

● (2240)

[*English*]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: There is a little background on that situation, Mr. Chair. There are 21 affected farmers in the member's riding. To date, they have received some \$8 million of government program spending.

As he has alluded to, another package is being worked on right now. I know the date that was agreed on by the provincial minister, my counterpart, and the industry is the end of May. I certainly intend to honour that date. We will work with the producers that are affected.

We are also looking at the opportunity or the possibility to use the new agricultural flexibility program to develop a pilot, as the farms are small by western standards, 60 acres roughly on average, to build economies of scale to move into some product base that will actually work for them. Corn is not going to do it. We understand that. Soy is not going to give them the return they need off of those small acres.

Is there something we can do to bring them together in a co-operative way, such as forming a pilot project? Is there something we can do that will take it through to a finished product that will bring them back into the farm sector on that ground? We are happy to work with them and continue those discussions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Malo: Mr. Chair, this answer is a step in the right direction. However, I will ask the minister a more specific question. His first offer to farmers was rather modest. There was \$5 million for the long-term recovery plan over a three-year period. As the minister himself mentioned, the acreage is small and not suitable for extensive corn production. The soil will also remain contaminated for a number of years because the golden nematode does not just disappear but remains dormant in the soil for several decades.

We will have to review the issue of markets. New crops cannot be planted until good market studies have been conducted and without a certain amount of market preparation or without knowing all the other players and creating a niche. It becomes rather complicated. There is also the matter of reputation. The minister is certainly aware that, since the arrival of the golden nematode, the municipality of Saint-Amable, the farmers, nursery workers and horticulturalists of that area have been subject to prejudice. The situation requires a complete repositioning. The warehouses and machinery were suited to the production of potatoes. If they have to change crops, they will need a transition program over a longer period of time.

The minister ordered an independent study that set the transition period at 10 years. It established the amounts required for the complete restructuring of the regional agricultural economy at about \$30 million or \$31 million. The farmers are prepared to provide up to 20% of that amount.

I would like the minister to tell us if the new offer will respect these parameters, which prevent the use of existing standardized programs. The farmers of Saint-Amable are in an extraordinary situation.

Business of Supply

• (2245)

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, the government understands the situation. The key point in what the hon. member has said and what I have spoken about is whether it will this be satisfactory. Somehow I doubt any amount ever would be. When the member talks in terms of \$30 million to \$31 million, I can be very frank and honest and say no, we will never get to that type of situation in a one-time payment.

We will do everything we can in joint work with the province of Quebec. We will continue to work with producers on pilot projects. He talks about a transition and he is on the right track. I intend to work with producers.

No one is going to cut and run. We realize this is a long-term process. We will work with producers. It is more than just money at stake here. As the member says, they want to rebuild their reputation. We are happy to work with them to do that. It is not just about money; it is about building a future and economies of scale and working toward something that will rejuvenate that area. We are happy to help.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Malo: Mr. Chair, I would like to finish my question about amounts. The minister seemed to be saying that the amounts in the study he himself ordered were excessive.

If independent analysts, people who are in no way involved in decision making and who examine a situation impartially and consider different parameters, looked in depth at the economic fabric, the environment, the quality and amount of land and the type of workers, in short, all the necessary parameters for a credible, relevant study, how did they arrive at such an amount? Would the minister not be inclined to go with what these independent experts came up with in their report?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I can do nothing but reiterate for the member opposite that we will continue to work with the affected producers, but there is a finite amount of money the taxpayers will put forward, and we will stretch it as far as we can.

I can assure the member opposite, we will do everything we can, but the whole point is this. It is more than just money. It is about rebuilding the quality of lifestyle, it is about rebuilding the area and it is about giving them an opportunity to move forward.

As I said, we will work with them to transition. We will work with them with pilot projects. However, when he talks in terms of \$30 million, that is probably beyond the scope of what taxpayers can afford at this time and place.

We will continue to discuss this and work with them. We do have a one time payment that we will be bringing to them by the end of this month. We will continue to have those discussions and we will move forward from there.

• (2250)

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Malo: Mr. Chair, on another note, but still related to the appearance of the golden nematode in Saint-Amable, in chapter 4 of

her 2008 annual report, the Auditor General of Canada indicated that the golden nematode appeared for the first time in Quebec in 2006. That was the first time the golden nematode had shown up in Canada. At the beginning of her remarks, she wrote:

The yearly pest survey plans of the Plant Health Surveillance Unit are not risk-based and focus almost exclusively on existing invasive plants, pests, and diseases rather than identifying potential new threats before they become established plant health emergencies.

Further on, she wrote:

Overall, the Plant Health Program lacks quality management processes in import-related activities key to keeping invasive alien species from entering and becoming established in Canada.

After I read the report, I wondered whether it was possible to conclude that, if the Canadian Food Inspection Agency had been much stricter in its assessment of exotic threats, the golden nematode might never have appeared on our agricultural lands. I would like the minister to comment on that.

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, unfortunately I cannot speak to the earlier years because we were not the government of the day, but the CFIA was forced to be a responsive agency as opposed to proactive. We made some changes so there is more proactive work done to try to curtail this type of thing before it gets a root hold in the area.

We take the advice of the Auditor General seriously. We accept her recommendations and strive to put them in place. Unfortunately, it is kind of after the horse is out of the barn.

We will continue to work with the area that is affected and with the producers who are affected to try to build them a future that is workable.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Malo: Mr. Chair, I wish I could believe the minister when he says that, basically, the government has received the recommendations and will do something. Back in 1996, the Auditor General had already identified a number of shortcomings, particularly with respect to information management. She said that the agency was still having problems in that area in 2008.

When the government accepts recommendations, does it do so just to get good press, just to enhance its public image, or does it then take action to achieve the goal?

Recently, during the listeriosis saga, we learned that self-regulation had become the norm and that pilot projects had been launched. Will budget cuts make the Canadian Food Inspection Agency more efficient and capable of fulfilling its mandate?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, let me just clarify one point from the Auditor General's report. That report was focused on imports. The golden nematode in question in that area of Quebec was not an imported pest. It is an important to make that distinction. To clarify the record, it was based on surveillance of farm practices that actually brought it to the fore, so it is not an import type of pest.

Business of Supply

The member opposite is not factual when he talks about stresses on the CFIA not being fully funded by the government. As I have said constantly, the two largest budgets in the last two years, pilot projects come and go, we pick the—

The Chair: We will have to resume debate, the hon. member for Elgin—Middlesex—London.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Chair, as the Minister of Agriculture has said many times before, the bedrock principle for all of our agriculture programs is farmers first.

We have to keep the farm gate strong to keep our processing and retail sectors strong. We will do what it takes to help Canadians weather this global economic storm. We will help protect the jobs of today while readying our economy to create the jobs of tomorrow. We are taking Canadian agriculture to new markets.

This minister is opening markets around the world, so that Canadian farmers can sell more products to their customers. I am also glad he travels Canada, talking to farmers first. I was glad to have him in our riding talking to farmers there.

Our government is targeting markets, such as the United States, Russia, Japan, India, China, Korea, Mexico, the Middle East, Morocco and the EU. We are building stable, bankable programs so that farmers can weather economic storms.

Farmers expect governments to work together, and we have worked with the provinces and territories to finalize the new suite of programs under growing forward. We have strengthened our food safety system and are ensuring that Canadians continue to have confidence in the products our farmers grow.

As I already said, we are facing the impact of a global economic storm. This government has been on top of this situation with proactive measures to make sure we come out stronger than ever.

In January our finance minister announced more than just a budget. It was an economic action plan for Canada to see us through this global downturn. That plan was based on good ideas from thousands of Canadians.

In my riding, as I am sure in others, we met with many groups from agriculture, business to producers to gather ideas for the budget. We wrote this economic action plan based on what was best for the economy and what was best for Canadians as we build toward the future.

The economic action plan included a flexible new community adjustment fund in the range of \$1 billion to help communities as they adjust to changing economic realities. We are cutting taxes for families and businesses to make sure they have the cash in their pockets to keep our economy running.

The government's action plan also delivered on key investments for Canadian farm families and for the farm families in southern Ontario and right in my riding, too. We all know we need more young people taking over the farms. Unfortunately, it is often impossible. It takes a huge capital investment to buy the equipment, land and quota necessary to get going. That capital is now harder to get than ever because of the current credit crunch.

That is why our government announced changes to the Farm Improvement and Marketing Cooperatives Loans Act, or FIMCLA as it is known. These changes will make it easier for new young farmers to get the credit they need to get started on the farm and to keep Canadian agriculture growing.

This government is working with Canadian producers to put farmers first in every agricultural policy we put forward. We are keeping our promises to Canadian farm families. We are keeping our communities strong by focusing on real help on the hardest hit. This government is taking good ideas from everyday Canadians to make sure Canada weathers the storm.

Young families and new farmers want a way of life, some want what mom and dad and grandma and grandpa had, and some really want a special way of life. In discussions with young farmers, not one has mentioned wanting cheques, just a fair shot at being a farmer, to have a family live the good life.

Can the minister expand on what we have done to make that possible?

• (2255)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Chair, I would need another hour to get that all in. It is just a great suite of programs that we have been able to develop working with industry, taking those good common sense ideas that industry brings forward, and working with the provinces and territories to introduce a new suite of programs that is national in scope but gives the regions the flexibility they need to deliver in the best interests of their farm gate.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank farmers for their strength, their dedication to their industry, and for their great common sense ideas, as I constantly say. I want to thank my team, too, all the folks who work on the agriculture committee. They all bring something to that committee. As I have often said, when we think with our heads and leave the politics behind, we can always develop better farm programs.

I also want to thank the Department of Agriculture and the CFIA for the tremendous work that they do and the job that they do getting those programs put together and through the machinery of government, which is not always easy, everybody understands that, and developing them and delivering them for farmers.

As I have said all along, we are not scared to step back, take another look, and make sure that what we are delivering helps farmers and hits the farm gate target that we are after.

The Chair: It being 10:58 p.m., pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), all votes are deemed reported. The committee will rise and I will now leave the chair.

Business of Supply

(The House adjourned at 11 p.m.)

• (2300)

The Deputy Speaker: This House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

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