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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (1110)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): Committee, the clerk has advised me that we are ready to proceed in public now, since you voted to go in public.

With that, I have to open the floor because consideration of the draft report cannot be considered while we're in public.

We'll go to Mrs. Gray and then to Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to say that the report we were to be discussing today was a draft report, but we can't talk about it because that was going to be in camera. Delaying the work of this committee is unfortunate because we do have timelines, especially going into a constituency week next week when the committee is not sitting. Any time we're delaying the work that has been set by this committee, it just delays things. We know there are only so many sitting weeks before Christmas, so all of that really does delay things.

On that, just to talk about the schedule of the committee, one thing that we at the committee were looking at was having ministers come to committee and talk about their mandates. Also, that was expanded. We see now, with the schedule that's been put forth, that we have less time with the ministers and this makes it really difficult.

For example, when a minister comes for only one hour, the minister does their statement, which could be five to 10 minutes, and then there are questions, which basically means that members from the official opposition would likely have only two or maybe three, if we're lucky. We have four members on this committee. When ministers come for only an hour, that means that not every member of this committee is able to ask questions of ministers, which means they're not being represented.

When you look at each of the ministers who report up through this committee, they have vast portfolios. To have a minister here for only an hour makes it very limited. Even if you just pick one issue that their department is dealing with, it makes it almost impossible to really properly ask the minister. As well, there are estimates that the ministers would come to speak on. Based on that, it makes it really difficult for us to properly question ministers.

We also know that the minister who's responsible for disability has put off meeting with this committee. There have been motions that have been put forth—and this is separate from what I'm talking

about with coming and talking about mandate or main estimates—and we still don't have a commitment from the minister of disability to come to this committee. I'm not sure why she hasn't agreed to come to this committee. Some of what we've talked about, and the original motion for one of them, was originally discussed by this committee back in February. Now we're looking at nine months since the minister knew she had to come to committee. That hasn't happened as part of that study. In addition to that, we've called the minister to come to talk about her mandate and the main estimates. I don't believe we have a date for the minister of disability as part of that. Those are two things that we're actually waiting for the minister to come to this committee on.

It's really unfortunate that this committee isn't agreeing to have the ministers come and answer about their portfolios. We know that there is a huge number of issues that do flow through this committee. We have the minister responsible for employment. When you look at the employment numbers, they are on a trajectory where unemployment keeps going up.

When you look at housing and all of the issues around housing, we do have a number of studies that this committee has done on housing. However, we need to hear from the Minister of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities as well.

• (1115)

Then there's diversity, inclusion and persons with disabilities. We have labour. We have seniors, families, children and social development, citizen services. These are vast portfolios. To have the ministers only come for one hour to talk about their mandate and also potentially to talk about supplementary estimates when we might only get a couple of rounds of questions is not acceptable.

Part of the job of this committee is to work on all of these portfolios and to hold the ministers to account. We really need to be hearing from these ministers in a more appropriate way. I know, even in past times, the other committee members have really shut it down, where we've had two ministers come at the same time—or even three ministers—which diminishes that even more. There are lots of questions that we need to ask. We hear from our constituents in our communities. We hear from stakeholders who flow through all of these departments, and we have lots of questions to answer.

Sometimes we'll write to a minister's office and it might take, depending on the minister, as long as six to nine months for their office to respond to something. That's the role of the official opposition, and that's the role of the opposition—to question ministers so that they can justify the decisions they're making and answer the tough questions.

When we don't have the ministers coming to spend the time here when they're needed, it does make it a lot more difficult for us to do our jobs within our portfolios, because we're meeting with constituents and also stakeholders. They're asking us whether we're pressing the minister on this or asking the minister about that, because quite often they're in the weeds on the issues that are important to their stakeholders, whether they're a membership-based organization or an organization that focuses on certain things that they're advocating for—for example, persons with disabilities, a lot of those organizations. They'll say that this is what's important to them and ask whether we're asking about that. However, it makes it really difficult when we don't have the ministers here often and for much time.

There are only so many questions and so many topics that we can ask them about. That's why it's really important to have the ministers here longer and to have them here to answer questions that all members are able to ask. As I said, during a one-hour time period, we might only get two rounds, which means that if we have two members, then that's only two members asking questions.

This does make it very difficult for us to hold the government to account and to ask the questions that we need to. We also might have different issues that we're bringing forth with different recommendations or different suggestions that we can also discuss during those times. Without having the ministers here for a very long period of time, again, that makes it much more difficult for us.

As we're looking at our calendar and the schedule from now until Christmas, I know that we do have some other studies that we're completing. I see on the calendar that the committee has invited back the other witness from the CNIB, who wasn't able to participate due to translation issues. Ironically, that was on a study that had to do with disabilities and persons with disabilities.

As a reminder, as we're looking at the calendar, it was Conservatives who had put forth a motion to extend that study and not close it, so that we could hear from the minister responsible for disabilities and inclusion, because she did not come to the other meetings that were scheduled. We asked for the study to be kept open and extended so that we could hear from the minister responsible for disabilities and hear from that stakeholder who wasn't able to participate. It's good to see that's on the calendar now, but that was because Conservatives had pushed for that.

• (1120)

Looking at the translation issue, it was incredibly ironic that this was a study that had to do with hearing from persons with disabilities or those who serve or advocate for them, and here we had someone who wasn't able to participate. I know that was part of House administration rules and the committee has put forth questions about that, but that is also on our calendar.

Because the minister didn't come, and because of that issue, that has taken another day from committee, which is good, because we do need to hear from the minister and from that other witness who wasn't able to participate. However, there are also other things we're waiting for at this committee. To hear from ministers about all of their portfolio—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): I have a point of order.

The Chair: Just a moment; we have a point of order.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: It's not easy to have this in my ear while somebody is talking in the room. There's a lot of chatter in the room, which makes it difficult for me to follow what's going on.

Chair, I would just ask you to please ensure that the room is quiet so it is easier for us.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much.

The Chair: You are all adults and know the rules. Mrs. Falk has a valid point. Please keep the side conversations to a minimum.

Mrs. Gray, go ahead.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just for any of those listening, on occasion—here's another translation issue, actually—what will happen at these committees is that we'll get feedback in the earpieces. You're actually hearing people talk at the same time. It's sort of like an echo. This is an ongoing problem that we've had. I know that the chair and the clerk have gone back to House administration on this, but it is an ongoing issue. Sometimes it's not a matter of actual translation. It's a matter of just hearing, because the volume in the room isn't very high and you actually need to have the earpiece in order to be able to hear what's being said. Some of it does appear to depend on what room we're in and on the set-up of the translators. It is an ongoing problem. We have commented on it many times, and for some reason we seem to be having the issue here again today. I don't know if this is the room. They also had to turn off a monitor due to sound issues that we've had in this room before. This is an ongoing issue.

To get back to what I was discussing in relation to the business of committee and ministers coming to committee, even when we look back, I think it was a year ago that the ministers were to come on estimates. It was past the date when they were to come. They were pushed off. There are certain deadlines that this committee has to follow and that all committees have to follow. The ministers actually were coming well into the new year, which does make it more difficult. When we're looking at the issues that the ministers have to come here to discuss, it's really important. We want to be questioning ministers on their entire portfolio, especially since sometimes we'll hear ministers make comments and we're not sure where they're coming from. One of the ministers was—

• (1125)

Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

There's a lot of speaking on the other side. Could you please ask members to keep it down a little? I can't hear.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coteau. That has already been raised.

Mrs. Gray, you have the floor.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll comment too that if multiple people have their mics on then you do get feedback as well.

Again, we've heard ministers or parliamentary secretaries make comments in the House of Commons, and you're sort of questioning, "Where does that come from?" The opportunity to ask them those questions would be when they come to committee.

There was a minister just last week who made a comment about Canada summer jobs, and I was looking at her thinking, "Where does that come from?" That is not something that came through this committee. It's not a recommendation that came through the study we had on the Canada summer jobs program. It's not something that was brought forth in the Conservative dissenting report when we did that study.

When we do have the ministers here, those are the kinds of things that we can question them on. Where is that coming from? Where are you hearing that? Is that a new policy? That's why it's really important for us to have ministers here for a good length of time to talk about their mandates and also about the main estimates.

There are a number of ministers we have not had here at this committee to even talk about their mandates. With the cabinet shuffle that happened several months ago, we have not had those ministers here to talk about their mandates. There are new ministers in those portfolios. Their mandates, for a number of them, didn't necessarily change from the former appointments. However, it behooves us to have those ministers come here so that they can tell us where their priorities are and how they fit into what those mandates are. We haven't even had an opportunity to do that with the cabinet shuffle that happened a number of months ago.

There might be another cabinet shuffle happening, with some ministers potentially stepping.... They might move things around because there are some people on the Liberal side who have announced that they're no longer running in the next election. There might be another shift as well. If that does happen and if it does involve this committee at all, we should be allowed to have those potentially newly appointed ministers come here to talk about their mandate and where their focus is. That's why it's so important, as part of the work that we do at this committee, to be really questioning the ministers.

I'm meeting with a number of stakeholders within all of the parts that fall within my role specifically as shadow minister for employment, workforce development and disability inclusion. I'm meeting with a lot of different stakeholders, and they're bringing forth a lot of issues to me. I really need the opportunity to be questioning the ministers on that, specifically the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Official Languages, and also the minister responsible for persons with disabilities. We haven't had those ministers here for quite a while.

It's really important that, when we do have them here, we have them for a good length of time so that all members on the official opposition side do have an opportunity to really question them. Regardless of their shadow portfolios, they're also representing their constituents. Their constituents ask them, "The next time you see the minister, can you ask these questions?" We all get asked that,

and if we're not given the opportunity, then it makes it more difficult for our jobs.

Our jobs are to bring the voices of our communities here to Ottawa. One of the ways to do that is through committee work and asking ministers the important questions that we're hearing from our residents and also, if we're a shadow minister, within our portfolio. That's why it's so important to have ministers here for a good length of time. One hour is simply not enough to cover everything that we have to, which includes mandates, main estimates and any other issues that we might want to ask about. Sometimes, too, the ministers will bring their officials, and then they might turn to the official to answer questions, and that takes even more time.

• (1130)

The ministers should be expected generally to come in the fall because that's when the main estimates are. We've also asked the ministers to come to talk about their mandates. When we look at our calendar going from now till Christmas, we just know for many of the ministers that they'll be here for just an hour, but we don't know when. They haven't committed. It's really not a surprise that a minister should be coming to committee in the fall, and it shouldn't be a surprise that they should be expecting to answer questions, and yet we don't know when many of the ministers are coming here.

The committee has the authority to have ministers come for longer. Ministers only coming for an hour to cover off all the things that we need to cover off is really not long enough. That's why we need to have them here for longer, or we need to have them come back, because there's just not enough time to ask the ministers everything that we need to ask them.

Again, going back to my shadow portfolio, I'm meeting continually with stakeholders from across the country, many of whom are in person here in Ottawa when they come and have their Hill days. Many people I'll meet on Zoom in order to get the feedback from them. They'll say, "How are you advancing this? What are you doing?" Of course, we can recommend studies at committee. We can put forth motions at committee to call different people here. We've done that before—for example, when we called the CEO of Air Canada here to talk about the issues relating to persons with disabilities.

We can question ministers when they come here to talk about their mandates and/or the main estimates. That's really what our job is, but it makes it more difficult when many ministers might only come once a year. I can think of a couple of ministers whom we haven't seen at this committee for a year now. There are always emerging issues that happen. Quite often, in a number of motions, we add that ministers also appear, and quite often that isn't agreed to. Therefore, it makes it more difficult because the only time we can question ministers is when they come for the main estimates or when they come for mandates.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, quickly.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Chair.

Chair, I'm just hoping that you could refresh us as to what the topic is. With respect, MP Gray is all over different topics. Could we, through you, ask MP Gray to maybe come forth with the motion?

• (1135)

The Chair: There was no specific topic when we went in public.

Mrs. Gray, you have the floor.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We don't have an agenda for this time here, but here we are in public. Therefore, when we came out of in camera to go into public.... Based on that, most of what I've been talking about is ministers coming to committee.

The other thing that we should really consider at this committee as well is when we do have ministers coming here, when we do have stakeholders coming here, it's really important for us to be able to question and ask them.

One thing with this committee that is a challenge from a time perspective is that we do have a fair amount of legislation that comes through this committee. That really does sometimes delay our ability to do a number of different studies. Legislation is important. Of course, government legislation is first, and then private members' bills as well. There always seem to be a number of private members' bills that do come through this committee, specifically around EI. It seems to be a topic from all parties where there are different private members' bills that come through. I know my colleague here, Rosemarie Falk, had a great private member's bill that had to do with.... It was so good that, in fact, the Liberal government took the idea of the private member's bill and put it in their omnibus bill, I believe, in the fall economic statement.

I'm glad to hear from members opposite that she did a good job in it. I do agree.

Just to refresh our memory, that had to do with people who were adopting or who were intended parents. That was a great piece of legislation to have parity for the amount of time that those people would go on EI, as opposed to people who had birthed a child. I was really proud to actually second that piece of legislation and to speak to it. Also, as a person who is adopted myself, it actually meant a lot to me. Thank you very much.

It's really great that our members can put forth that type of legislation. I was really happy to see that that did go through all the stages, although it then got stuck, because the government did not give it royal assent, unfortunately. Then they put it in with their own legislation. I guess they wanted to have credit for it.

You're the one who deserves the credit, Mrs. Falk, absolutely.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: It was very impactful to hear from many of the stakeholders from across the country who supported your legislation.

I know we have other pieces of legislation that have come through here as well—private members' bills that have been really well thought out.

I know our colleague, Ms. Vien, from Quebec, has a great piece of legislation that will be coming to this committee. I know that it was supported. I believe it was supported unanimously in the House—I'd have to look back. That was another really great Conservative piece of legislation that will be coming to this committee soon. It will take priority over other things, because it is a private member's bill. We also know, for private members' bills, that there are timelines that have to be met or else you have to ask for extensions. That's really important.

Some of these pieces of legislation or some of these recommendations really do come from wanting to support families. However, also we know that families are having an incredibly difficult time. We know that food bank usage is higher than it has ever been before. We heard incredible amounts of testimony at this committee on that particular topic.

In particular, when we were doing a study on intergenerational volunteerism, we heard from a number of not-for-profit organizations that gave very impactful testimony on how their not-for-profits were really suffering, because their donations were down. They were losing volunteers. They were saying that there were a number of volunteers of theirs who then had to become clients, unfortunately. We heard from some not-for-profits that had lost volunteers who were seniors, because they had to go back to work in order to pay for their basic necessities. We heard the record numbers of food bank usage. I know we had one witness, actually, from my community, from the Central Okanagan Food Bank, who talked about the increases in numbers.

I've talked about this quite a bit, and I've seen this, too, with other members of this committee, where we want to represent our residents. I always made it a goal coming here that I wanted to bring the voice of my community to Ottawa, and really made it a point to bring forth witnesses who could testify on a whole number of different topics. There are lots of witnesses who have testified here who might have worked in an industry for 30 years and never testified at a parliamentary committee before. It was really impactful for them to bring forth their voices here. I'm always thinking about who might fit with this study, who might be an expert in their own way, and bring their voice here—if not within my community, then from British Columbia. I think sometimes here you have the Ottawa bubble, as they call it, where you're hearing from lots of the same witnesses. I think it's important to hear from witnesses from all across the country.

• (1140)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Mr. Chair, I rise on a point of order.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Chabot, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, the many people watching us—we are very popular, of course—must be wondering what we are doing.

We set an agenda, which included an in-camera meeting. A member of the governing party asked for it to be a public meeting, but we still do not know why.

I am addressing you, Mr. Chair, because I do not know enough about procedure. I would like to move a motion to have us to revert to in camera and proceed to orders of the day, as planned.

[*English*]

The Chair: There was again an issue—

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): On that point of order—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I'm having a hard time hearing Ms. Chabot. I'm hearing the French. Her French is on the English channel, which has the interpreted English on the same channel. I'm having a very hard time hearing what she is saying.

The Chair: The issue, the technical people tell me, is the volume.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: That's unacceptable.

If I turn my volume up, I'm hearing her French in the room and on the channel with the English. I'm hearing it all on one. If I turn it down, I hear nothing except what's in the room. It's unacceptable as a member of Parliament for me to be contributing to committee and to not be able to hear the language that my colleague wants to speak in.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: It's unacceptable.

The Chair: I do not approve the language validations and the technical aspects. The technical people do, and they meet the standards set by the House of Commons.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I'm sorry, Chair, but that is unacceptable. If I can't hear a colleague of mine who is speaking in another language, how can we participate equally in the committee?

It's not acceptable. It's impeding our ability to actually participate and be heard in the committee.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk. There could be some differences. I was able to hear the translation with no problem.

I have Mr. Seeback next, and then I'll go to Mr. Coteau, on a point of order.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: On that point of order, yes, there was an agenda for an in camera meeting to discuss several things. There was a motion to move out of in camera and change the agenda, and Madame Chabot voted in favour of that. I'm not sure why she's so confused as to where we are. She decided to disrupt the agenda and vote with the Liberal motion.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, I—

[*English*]

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I'm not finished.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Seeback.

It is now moving into debate.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I rise on a point of order.

I was accused of being confused. I would like an apology.

[*English*]

The Chair: That was debate.

I'm going to Mr. Coteau. Keep it narrow. The committee voted to move in public.

Mr. Michael Coteau: I just have a quick question, Mr. Chair, with regard to relevance.

What's in front of us right now as a committee?

The Chair: There was no specific item attached to the motion to move in public.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Wouldn't it be correct to assume that if nothing is in front of us, then nothing is relevant, and therefore we should probably move to some type of motion or something? We have to place something in front of us. We're just talking about nothing.

That was in order to move something or to do something.

The Chair: Mrs. Gray has the floor. The committee is scheduled for two hours.

Mr. Fragiskatos, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): I have a point of order, Chair.

Look, there are differences between parties on a range of issues. My experience has always been that we've engaged each other with respect and with decorum. Mr. Seeback's comments about Ms. Chabot are really out of line. He should apologize for saying something like that and questioning whether or not a member understands what she's doing. It's just not collegial.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

On points of order, I will be really clear on being relevant.

We're now going to return to Mrs. Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Here we are at this committee, which is the human resources committee. We really do deal with lots of compassionate types of issues at this committee. We've heard some pretty impactful testimony on how people are struggling. We know that recently there was the Food Banks Canada "2024 Hunger Report", which stated that there was a historic number of visits in March 2024 alone, over two million—I think it was 2,059,636.

We know that life has become more expensive for Canadians after nine years of this government. Food Banks Canada released the data showing that a record number of Canadians are struggling just to keep their heads above water, and having to rely on food banks.

According to their HungerCount, food banks recorded these historic numbers, which is an increase of 6% from the previous year, and a shocking 90% increase from 2019. We know that over a quarter of those visits were made by children, which is really heart-breaking. As a result of these historic levels of demand placed on food banks, nearly 30% of food banks across the country—across their network—reported running out of food in the last 12 months.

I'm not sure if anyone has seen some of the headlines very recently, even over the last couple of weeks, about food banks really coming out and reporting on this. Many food banks are concerned with being able to fulfill their holiday commitments, their Christmas commitments. Another 56% reported giving out less food to avoid running out before they could serve anyone. In 2021, these numbers were 10% and 20% respectively. We can see the huge increase here.

Something that lots of people don't talk about with inflation—and we know that food inflation was higher than inflation itself, once we break it down—is that the numbers don't go back down. When you have food inflation that's over 8%, 9%, 11%, if inflation itself comes down below 2%, it's still at that higher amount, which is why people are having such a tough time. When inflation goes down, say, below 2%, that doesn't mean it goes down to what it was back in 2018. It's still at that higher amount, which is why we're seeing so many families really struggling.

We know that Food Banks Canada also reported that up to 25% of Canadians are living in a state of poverty, while 35% of Canadians feel worse off financially. Among those who reported experiencing a worsening financial situation compared to three months ago, 40% cited the rise in the cost of food as the primary reason, and 30% of Canadians are worried about not being able to feed themselves and their families.

We know that the carbon tax does add to the cost of food. We know that it adds to the cost of transportation.

• (1150)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mrs. Gray, we have a point of order from Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: It's not my intention to interrupt, of course, but Mrs. Gray began her talk here today about ministerial appearances. She does have a motion on notice on that very subject. If she wanted to put that motion forward, I think we would welcome that—certainly, on our side. We would be ready to vote. That would be staying on topic.

She's now deviating to another topic; however, I leave that with her to decide. That motion is something we're ready to look at.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mrs. Gray, please continue.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There isn't a topic, because we don't have an agenda for an out-of-camera portion here, but thank you for your consideration.

We know that Stats Canada released new numbers showing that for the eighth time in nine quarters Canada's GDP per capita had dropped. Why is GDP per capita important? What the government talks about a lot is GDP, yet GDP per capita is actually relative to the productivity of a country. It is also relative to how people are doing in their households. We know that the GDP per capita of Canada has gone down over the last nine years. We know that Canada's productivity has gone down. The OECD actually has Canada on track to be one of the least productive countries over the next many years, unless there is a substantive change in fiscal and economic policy made by the government.

The GDP per capita for Canada has now fallen more than for any other G7 country since the year before COVID. This is the direct result of higher taxes on everything from capital gains to energy and work. There are higher taxes on everything. Also, the debt has grown more during these nine years of this government than at any other time, accumulated from all the previous governments in Canada.

The gap between U.S. and Canadian incomes is now worse than at any time in the last century, as the average American now earns \$20,000 more than the average Canadian. This is a substantial difference. We had testimony here recently from one of the witnesses on the housing study. When we were asking about losing business here in Canada to the U.S., and why we were losing that to the U.S., he referred to the fact that that was true, and that we were also losing workers, because of the opportunity, but also even just because the cost of living was less. I think one witness referred to his son potentially even looking at that. This is real, when we're losing opportunity in Canada and when businesses are looking to the U.S.

Recently, we even had Mark Carney's company saying that they're going to be moving Brookfield out of Canada to the U.S., which is absolutely interesting considering that Mr. Carney is one of the top advisers to the Prime Minister. I think he's called his top economic adviser, and yet he's moving that company to the U.S. That was just announced. That's really quite interesting.

We know that when we look at the GDP per capita, this means lower wages in comparison to the U.S., which means Canadians can afford less, and there's less they can spend on food, housing and basic necessities. We also know that governments can afford less for schools and hospitals. These are the direct results of that.

We know that Canada is falling behind other countries because of weak business investment, a lack of competition and a failure to really look at the workforce and to lower taxes. This lower GDP per capita is a made-in-Canada issue. The current government quite often will blame so much on everyone else, including global factors. There is some of that, but really, when you look at GDP per capita, when you look at tax increases, there is so much that we can look at that is a direct result of policies of this current government. Lots of these issues are made-in-Canada issues.

• (1155)

We know that there's been investment has has been driven out of the country for everything. We look at housing being so much less in the United States. We know that fuel costs less. The United States doesn't charge a carbon tax on the fuel that their citizens use. Really, Canadians deserve better, and we're really falling behind other countries, in particular the United States.

We know as well that when we look at EI, for example, employment insurance, it does come through this committee as well, which is why it would be really important to have the minister come here for longer than an hour. His portfolio covers so much that we need to ask him about.

In August, just under 500,000 Canadians were claiming employment insurance. That was the fourth consecutive monthly increase, and an increase of 26,000 people from the same time last year. As a result of this, Canada reached a 20-month high in the number of people who were claiming EI. We also know, as part of this, that the largest group of people who are collecting EI are young adults, so we can see why young adults are struggling, having mental health issues and losing hope of ever being able to afford a home or being able to have a good lifestyle. It's incredibly sad, which is why you're seeing so many young adults who are coming out en masse not in favour of the policies of this government.

We know that, in September, the labour force survey showed that, year over year, employment had only increased by 313,000 people, while the working-age population surged by 1.2 million, leaving an enormous employment deficit. Since January 2023, Canada's employment rate has followed a downward trend, falling by a full percentage point. We also know that Canada's GDP per capita is currently on track to decrease again, so unless there are substantive economic and fiscal policy changes made by this government, all of the trajectories aren't looking positive, in particular for our young adults.

It was expected that food will cost—

• (1200)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Chair, there was a pause there. I take it that Mrs. Gray is relinquishing the floor, or at least, if she's not, then a pause would indicate that we're ready to—

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Oh, my goodness, is it me breathing?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: No, it's not even about that.

Chair, I'm next on the list.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: That's not a point of order.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm next on the list, and there was a break in what she was saying.

It's time to relinquish the floor.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I didn't cede my time.

The Chair: I will remind members that they have the floor until they stop speaking. If you stop speaking, I will make a call and move to the next person on the list.

Mrs. Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I hope that you will allow.... You know, if I take a breath or swallow, that's not—

The Chair: I'll be the judge of stopping and moving to the next speaker. Thank you.

Mrs. Gray, you have the floor.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

After nine years, we know that food costs families \$700 more this year than it did in 2023. Millions of Canadians are having to line up outside of food banks just to survive. We've now seen record numbers of people going to food banks—two million people a month going to food banks.

As I mentioned earlier, food banks are running out of food and are making different policies around whom they're going to serve. We also saw a Statistics Canada report on food insecurity, which showed that nearly 15.6% of Canadians experienced food insecurity in 2022, which was up from 11.6% in 2018 and 9.6% in 2017. This means that the rate of food-insecure Canadians had increased by over 60% over the course of just two years. These are numbers from Statistics Canada. This isn't any kind of partisanship discussion. These are actually StatsCan numbers.

It became worse in 2024, and this was made clear through Food Banks Canada's 2024 poverty report card, showing that almost 50% of Canadians feel financially worse off compared to last year, while 25% of Canadians are experiencing food insecurity. Food insecurity means that people aren't able to have the food that they need in order to survive. We've also heard sad stories that scurvy is increasing in Canada. Again, it's just absolutely unbelievable.

Across the country, food banks “have seen a 50 per cent increase in visits since 2021”, and this is a direct consequence of the NDP-Liberal government's inflationary tax and spending agenda and its carbon tax. We know that the carbon tax makes the price of everything go up. Everything that is transported has the carbon tax tied to it. Therefore, when you're talking about the farmer who grows the food, or the food manufacturer, if that's the case, or the warehouse, transporters, retailers and then ultimately the consumers, all along the way, there's carbon tax being charged at every stage as you go.

No wonder food prices have increased as much as they have. You only have to go to a grocery store to see the increases in the food prices. We know that the carbon tax is slated to increase to 61 cents per litre, and that will be on every point of this value chain, or food chain, if you call it that, as you go. That will only increase prices more. Even as you see where inflation might be, food costs will go up. Ultimately, those get passed on to the consumer; that gets passed on to families.

Even for those businesses that are supporting families, like food banks, that means their costs go up as well. People do donate money. Not everyone donates food and cans. The food banks and other organizations really rely on financial donations, and they're not going as far. We hear that quite often. As costs keep increasing, their costs keep increasing. It's a really vicious cycle.

There are things that we need to do in order to.... I just took a sip of water. Hopefully that's allowed. Thank you very much.

• (1205)

This is another issue we're looking at. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation released their housing data for September, which was just a month ago, showing that there are still not enough homes being built for Canada's population. As a result, housing affordability will continue to remain out of reach for Canadians. This CMHC report—which, again, isn't a partisan report, as this comes right from the government—shows that housing starts continue to trend lower while Canada's population has increased. In fact, the six-month trend reveals a 1.9% decrease, from 246,972 units in August to 243,759 units in September.

When comparing September 2024 to September 2023, the results are even worse. Across the country, housing starts were down 15% to 18,806 this September, compared to 22,194 in September 2023. In Nova Scotia, housing starts collapsed by 40% in the same period, while Ontario saw a drop of 37%.

Those numbers are staggering. We know there have to be a lot more housing starts happening in order to build the homes that we need, but also to bring back some type of affordability. I'll talk more about the Conservative announcement shortly.

Similarly, in Canada's most expensive cities, the government's housing plans and policies have really not done anything to build more homes. For example, in Toronto, when comparing September 2024 to September 2023, the number of housing starts declined by 64%, while Montreal and Halifax saw their housing starts decline by 59% and 61%, respectively. Those are huge numbers that show that starts are down.

We also know some of this. We've had different testimony here from witnesses who are builders, experts in their field, who have talked about the interest rates being one of the main reasons. We know that interest rates are slowly coming down. They're still very high.

Mr. Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound—Muskoka, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: It's getting very noisy in here again. I'm sitting very close to Mrs. Gray, and I was struggling to hear her.

She's talking about something very important, housing, and I really want to hear it.

The Chair: We agree. Thank you, Mr. Aitchison.

As I indicated before, I hear noise coming from all around the room, and I'll remind you that you are all adults.

Go ahead, Mrs. Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was talking about some of the construction companies and builders that were here. They were talking about how it's more difficult, because the interest rates are high. Costs have gone up. They talked about the cost of everything—the cost of transportation, which we know is increasing because of the carbon taxes.

In addition to that, we had witnesses who talked about how the capital gains tax is not helping, either. Investors might invest in a number of these larger development projects, which we need, so the capital gains tax change is not going to help housing. I recently asked a number of witnesses about what the finance minister said when she originally announced that the capital gains tax would help with housing and increase it. We heard that it's not the case. I asked multiple witnesses about that. They said, "Well, no, it's not going to."

There are a number of federal policy-related factors that are not helping with the building of homes. We know 5.8 million homes need to be built. CMHC said that Canada needs to build those homes by 2030 in order to restore housing affordability. Again, a number of these different witnesses at committee here were asked by me and others whether or not we're going to be on track to do that. Even if we break it down by how many houses we have to build per year, are we on track to do that? All along the way, we heard, "No, we are not on track to do that." I think one witness said, "Not a chance."

We know, based on these policies, that we are not on track to build that number of homes, which is why we need bold policies. For example, the leader of the official opposition announced a Conservative policy this week. When he becomes Prime Minister and the Conservatives are in government, we will remove the GST on all new homes sold under \$1 million. As an example, for an \$800,000 home, it would mean savings of \$40,000, or \$2,200 a year in mortgage payments. This is a substantial policy we have put out.

An overwhelming number of organizations have come out in favour of that particular policy, in order to build those homes and bring back affordability, especially for young families and people starting out and owning a home for the first time. I don't have a list in front of me here, but some of these are the Canadian Home Builders' Association, the Canadian Real Estate Association and Habitat for Humanity. There have been policy experts who have come out on this, such as the West End Home Builders Association and a number of organizations from all across the country. Whether they're national or local organizations, they have come out saying that they are in favour of this.

I will read a couple of quotes about how impactful this will be. The Canadian Home Builders' Association said:

Today's announcement by the Conservative Party of Canada to remove GST on new homes with a purchase price under \$1 million will make a big difference if enacted, especially for first-time buyers.

West End Home Builders Association CEO Mike Collins-Williams said:

Removing the GST for new homes purchased for under \$1 million may be the most significant housing policy commitment made in the past two decades. Removing the GST shows leadership to cut crippling levels of taxation on new housing, puts money directly back into the pockets of Canadians while combating the housing crisis.

• (1210)

We have the Coalition Against New-Home Taxes, which said that this policy marks a significant first step in addressing Canada's housing affordability crisis, a goal we believe is essential for substantial economic growth and accessible housing for Canadians.

There's also the Canadian Real Estate Association, which said, "This proposed step is a positive move toward lowering building costs, increasing housing supply, and making home ownership more attainable for Canadians."

The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness founder and CEO Tim Richter said, "This is smart."

Habitat for Humanity said that under the current framework, Habitat affiliates are paying more in GST to the federal government than is received through co-investment funding. Eliminating GST would reduce costs. Savings are passed on to Habitat homeowners.

The Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association said, "In Ottawa this change would mean that townhomes, which make up over 50% of new home sales, would be eligible for the full rebate, instantly making a significant improvement in housing affordability across the National Capital Region."

BILD GTA said: "BILD applauds the Federal Conservatives' announcement on their commitment to addressing one of our calls to action. If elected, they plan to remove the federal portion of the HST on new homes under \$1 million. This is a significant step forward in helping housing affordability."

There's also the Residential Construction Council of Ontario. President Richard Lyall said, "We commend opposition leader Pierre Poilievre and his party for putting forward this plan to remove the GST and encourage the provinces to do the same as it will save buyers tens of thousands of dollars on the purchase of a new home".

Then we have, from LiUNA, director of public relations Victoria Mancinelli: "This is good policy."

We also have Eric Lombardi, a Toronto-based consultant with expertise in financial services, who said, "Glad to see this, much needed change! I'd also suggest indexing to inflation. I also echo the call for provinces to end the HST on homeownership dreams! (And DCs/LTTs) However, funding shouldn't come at the expense of the Housing Accelerator Fund."

Now, what I do want to mention here, actually, is calling for the removal of the provincial taxes as well, which the Leader of the Opposition did do yesterday, which was to call for provinces—where it's appropriate—to also remove the provincial sales taxes. This is very important.

We've also had Mike Moffat, economist and founding director of the Place Centre, who said, "WOW. According to my costing calculator, this is about a \$5-6B tax cut on new housing each year. I admire the boldness here. This will get more housing built." I also know that Dr. Moffat has made a number of other comments online, on X, that relate to this announcement. He's had quite a number of comments. I don't have them all here, but I do encourage anyone who is on X to have a look at those comments, because they really are quite significant.

We also have Martin Pelletier, economy columnist at the National Post, who said, "Now that's a good idea."

We have Steve Saretsky, realtor, who said, "No GST on new homes under \$1M. That will certainly make new construction prices more competitive when competing against the resale market."

• (1215)

There's more coming in all the time. That's just a small example of some of the comments made by some of these experts in homebuilding and policy.

• (1220)

Mr. Kyle Seeback: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I'm just wondering where I am on the speaking list.

The Chair: You are after Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: It's Mrs. Gray, Mr. Fragiskatos, and then me. Is there anyone else on the speaking list?

The Chair: Yes. Mrs. Falk and Mr. Aitchison are.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mrs. Gray, go ahead.

Mr. Michael Coteau: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, what's the topic right now? What are we talking about? Could you let us know?

The Chair: I do not choose that. Mrs. Gray has the floor.

Mr. Michael Coteau: No, I meant, can you tell us what the topic is in front of us, as the chair?

The Chair: The topic is the points that Mrs. Gray is discussing. Thank you.

Mrs. Gray, go ahead.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The other thing I'll mention on this point is how rent continues to get more expensive for Canadians. We know that Rentals.ca published their national rent report, which showed the consequences of this government's policies. Canada's average asking rent reached a record high of \$2,093 in September. On top of this, the cost of rent is 13.4% higher than it was two years ago, and 25.2% higher than it was three years ago. This means that the cost of rent has really massively outpaced Canadians' paycheques.

We know that the situation is even considerably more difficult in Canada's largest cities. For example, in Vancouver, British Columbia, the average asking rent for all unit types reached \$3,023. Canadians are having to pay \$2,668 in Toronto. With rent costing as much as it does, many Canadians are having to live in shared accommodation. We know that many, in particular young adults, are still living with parents. I know myself of some constituents of mine where a family has had to move back in with one of the parents just in order to get by, so that maybe they can work on saving for a home one day.

On that topic, we know that it used to take 25 years to pay off a mortgage. It now takes 25 years to save for a down payment. I remember being in my early twenties, like many of us in this room here, when, as long as you had a decent job, you could have a decent car. You could go on the odd holiday. You could save up, within a short amount of time, a down payment for your first small place to start out. That doesn't exist anymore, which is why you're seeing so many young adults still living with relatives and family members, and families living together. They just can't afford to either live on their own or save up for their first place. This is the reality that people are in.

We also know, in talking with seniors, that in order for them to even consider downsizing... I talk to seniors quite often in my riding. They're saying, "I could sell my home, but where do I go? Prices are so high now that even if I downsize, everything is so expensive." The cost of housing is affecting everyone in all demographics. We know that housing costs have doubled in nine years. Those are substantial numbers.

We know that the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has made it clear that the number of homes being built isn't enough to reduce the existing supply gap and improve affordability for Canadians.

Actually, on that, when we're talking about affordability and housing through CMHC, we had a number of people testify here at some recent housing studies. They were saying that the bureaucracy, the red tape and the costs that the CMHC itself is imposing are making housing less affordable. As an example, we heard from more than one not-for-profit talking about the fact that CMHC will

impose extra ways of building that are above the regular, if you want to call it that, building code standards, therefore adding costs. They will also impose that you need different experts to come in. Even though it meets all the building codes and you might even get a building permit, you have to have these extra consultants come in. We heard testimony from some of these not-for-profits that this could easily add at least \$15,000 per unit.

• (1225)

That is a huge amount. They also expressed how, with CMHC, the delays they're experiencing, when they do these applications with CMHC, can actually add to costs. We heard testimony from one witness who was saying that, depending on where the building is, if you don't have approvals, you might miss the whole season because of the weather. Therefore, you may not be able to start or to move along whatever stage it is. We heard that policies from CMHC are actually impeding building these affordable units and adding to costs.

Also, going back to some of these consultants who have to come in, we did hear that, particularly in rural communities, they may not have these consultants readily available, so they have to bring them in from a major municipality. Again, that adds delays and costs. In fact, some of the policies of the Liberal government and those through CMHC are actually not helping to build affordable homes due to the bureaucracy, the red tape and the additional costs.

We also know that, at the same time, Canadians' paycheques are just not keeping up with inflation. We had a report recently, through the Parliamentary Budget Officer, which showed that inflation and sky-high interest rates had "eroded" the power of Canadians' paycheques over the last two years. This is especially hard on low-income workers, while the wealthiest Canadians saw their wealth appreciate thanks to their investment income.

I don't have it here, but I was reading an article last night. I think it might have been in the Financial Post. I was just reading something last night that talked about this. Again, during this time, and even in recent times, the people who are getting the farthest ahead are the wealthiest of the wealthiest because they've seen their investments go up. If you're not at that level... The people in the middle class and the working class—or, as we call them, "the working poor"—have really been among the hardest hit.

Going back to this Parliamentary Budget Officer report, it described that "inflation and the accompanying tightening of monetary policy have affected household purchasing power disproportionately, depending on income level." On top of this, Canadians' incomes have not kept up with Trudeau's rampant inflation.

In fact, RBC predicted recently—this would have been in September—that Canada's GDP per capita will decrease "for a sixth consecutive quarter." This means that the personal income of Canadians has now fallen back to the same level that we've seen previously, while unemployment has increased. We also know that even the government's own reports have said it's expecting unemployment on a trajectory to continue to rise.

We know that Canadians have seen price increases of more than 15% on a typical basket of goods and services. The costs of food, shelter and transportation have grown especially quickly, which again has made it really tough for those in the lower income percentiles and for a lot of the working Canadians. We know that inflationary deficits and taxes have resulted in a wealth transfer, so we're seeing that the wealthiest of the wealthiest really have gotten ahead, especially over the last few years. Unless you have a considerable amount of assets, a considerable amount of stocks, you haven't seen your wealth grow. In fact, paycheques have been reduced during this time for most Canadians. Even if they saw a moderate paycheque increase, it is not enough to offset the increases that we've seen.

• (1230)

We've also seen numbers from Statistics Canada that show that the greatest cost increases have been on the essentials. The biggest cost increases have been on housing, food and fuel. When you look at where the big cost increases are that are affecting people and that are affecting small businesses, you see that they're actually on those essentials.

I'll continue talking about where Canadians' incomes are and how the costs have been affected. In 2014—the year before this current government took office—The New York Times wrote that Canada was “Home of the World's Most Affluent Middle Class”. This is what I was just mentioning. Now the per capita economic output in most of our regions across the country lags behind those in the United States.

The state of Canada's economy was confirmed again by the Fraser Institute, which reported that Canadians' incomes have drastically fallen behind the incomes of Americans and that Fraser Institute research shows that “Canadian provinces are getting poorer relative to their US peers.”

When you're looking at some of these comparisons, you're seeing that it's more difficult for people here in Canada. We are falling further behind. As I mentioned, this RBC report does predict that Canada's GDP per capita will continue to decrease. When we're comparing Canada to other countries, we see that this is a made-in-Canada issue.

The other thing we've seen at this committee is how people with disabilities are struggling. We've had a fair amount of testimony here. We've almost completed the disability study that I was mentioning earlier, and we know that persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected by the cost of living crisis. We've heard some testimony from their family members. Being the shadow minister, I know that my shadow ministry includes disability inclusion. I do talk to families and organizations all the time that talk about how persons with disabilities are affected. This also really affects many of their families because, depending on the situation, sometimes the families are the primary caregivers and are having to assist their family member or look after their family member. The cost of living crisis really has disproportionately hurt persons with disabilities.

I know that when we were debating the Canada disability benefit, we heard about this quite often. We even heard testimony regarding persons with disabilities considering MAID because they

couldn't afford to live. It is incredibly heartbreaking and incredibly sad that someone would be considering that. We know that many Canadians are feeling quite hopeless when they're looking at being able to just afford basic necessities.

In spite of all this, the government continues on with the trajectory of its policies, of its high-tax, high-spend agenda. We haven't seen any indication of a reprieve from this. We know that any time this government puts out a fall economic statement or a budget, it does still include deficits. We know there are reports that the deficits are higher than what was expected by the government. It just shows how this government isn't able to manage its fiscal house—when every time we have a budget come out, it continues to be in deficit.

• (1235)

We have to remember that when this government got elected, back in 2015, they talked about how they were just going to have a little deficit.

Mr. Michael Coteau: I have a point of order.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: They were going to do some investing in Canadians—that was the sales pitch—and they were going to—

The Chair: Mrs. Gray, we have a point of order.

Mr. Michael Coteau: You said that the subject is what the member talks about. There have been several subjects. Maybe you can ask the member what subject she's actually discussing at this point.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coteau. It is at the member's discretion.

Mrs. Falk, do you have a point of order?

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Just in response to what Mr. Coteau said, because this has been brought up several times, we were supposed to be in camera.

Mr. Michael Coteau: That's not a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Mr. Long moved a motion to put us in public, which gave us no agenda.

Mr. Michael Coteau: That is not a point of order.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: It gave us no agenda whatsoever, so we don't actually have a specific topic—

The Chair: Mrs. Falk—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: —that we are supposed to be chatting about today.

The Chair: Order.

Mrs. Falk, that is not a point of order, but you did give her a pause.

Mrs. Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This just shows that members of this government don't want to talk about what's important to people and how there was a promise made in the 2015 election to have a very small deficit, as I was saying. That was blown out of the water. You know, this government was already going into deficit before the COVID pandemic hit. They were already going into deficit at a time when the economy was considerably stronger, back in 2015. Then, of course, through deficit spending, they blew through that. We also know, through an Auditor General's report we saw, that much of the spending this government did during the pandemic wasn't in alignment with the mandates that existed, so they continued on with this high spending.

Here we are now, where the national debt is the highest it's ever been. We know debt-servicing payments are going to be higher than they have ever been. Instead of investing back into Canadians and very important initiatives, whether it be border security or the environment, it's now going towards servicing the debt. One of the numbers we saw is that the annual debt-servicing amount will be very close to the amount of GST brought in every year, so it nulls most of that GST coming in. Another number we saw is that it's more than we spend on the military.

The debt-servicing costs this government has to pay are very concerning because of all the spending they've done. We know, when we look at government spending, that there is so much waste. Look at, for example, giving fridges to Loblaws. I remember when the government did that. I got a call from a local small business in my community—a florist. They said, “Well, I need a new fridge for my flowers. Can I get a new fridge, as well?” I had a small independent grocer call and say, “Can I get new fridges, as well?” Well, no, it only went to one of the largest, most profitable companies in Canada—Loblaws. We know the government gave \$50 million to Mastercard, of all organizations, which gets huge interest payments off Canadians.

Of course, there are ArriveCAN and SDTC, which we're now debating in the House of Commons. The money has rolled through on that. We know the Auditor General did an audit of that and found there were 186 instances of conflicts of interest. Absolutely shocking numbers of dollars flew through that organization, where board members who were executives of organizations were the recipients of money coming from the government. I mean, it was absolutely mind-blowing.

When we look at government spending, these are the kinds of things we're talking about. As well, with SDTC, there was a board member who was terminated, one who talked poorly about the government. The Liberal minister of the day appointed someone else. It came out later that it was known that this person was in conflict because their company was receiving money, and yet the minister still decided to appoint that person. They then appointed different board members as well.

• (1240)

You can't say that SDTC was at arm's length, because there were senior officials in the minister's department who were sitting in on board meetings. They were privy to the discussions and the decisions that were happening at that board meeting. It was only because of a whistle-blower who had come forward to bring this forth

that we heard about this. They brought it forth and nothing happened. Then they went directly to the Auditor General, who did this audit. This is what has been brought forth. Of course, this is what we're debating in Parliament right now. The government won't release all of the unredacted documents directly to the RCMP. Parliament is seized with this right now.

Here's another example of such a lack of oversight from this government on government spending. We know that, for example, we have the benefits delivery modernization that we did question the minister on the last time he was here. It's upgrading a lot of the different programs that deliver services to Canadians. That has blown through the original budget. We're talking billions of dollars; that was disclosed the last time the minister was here. We know that this minister will be coming again, but we'll have the minister here for only an hour. When you're talking about the spending of billions and billions of dollars, we need the time in order to ask the minister the really tough questions. This is a huge budget that this minister is responsible for. We really need to be asking the tough questions.

Also, when we're talking about homebuilding costs, one thing I didn't mention earlier was the fact that Canada does not have a softwood lumber agreement. The softwood lumber agreement expired back in 2015. During three different administrations, this government has not been able to negotiate a softwood lumber agreement. The former Conservative government did have a softwood lumber agreement. They negotiated a renewal or an extension, and then it expired in 2015. That has not been a priority of this government.

What does flow through this committee is employment and workforce development. As part of that, thousands of forestry jobs have been lost in Canada, in particular in British Columbia, my home province. Many mills have closed. We know that there's not a lack in North America of what they're producing. It's just that the business has been lost to the United States. Without our having a softwood lumber agreement here, the U.S. continues to add tariffs. Because our supply chains are so integrated, that just makes the cost go up here in Canada. People might ask why that is important. Well, it's because our supply chains are integrated. When things are going back and forth, it means that costs are higher. It does add to the cost of homebuilding when you have lumber that is more expensive.

That has not been a priority of this government. I remember one time we were asking the minister when she was having meetings set up with her counterparts in the United States. Shockingly, the trade minister couldn't even answer those questions about when she was having meetings and when formal negotiations were taking place. That was a few years ago, when I was involved in that portfolio, and still to this date nothing has happened. Recently, tariffs have been added on again.

• (1245)

This just shows a real lack of these ministers' and this government's having eyes on their departments and oversight, governance and management of those departments, being able to ask the tough questions and being able to move things forward that are in the best interest of Canadians.

One of the other things that we can look at as well is crime and how much crime has gone up in this country. I know that, when I'm home and I'm in my community, without even looking at the national statistics, what I hear about the most is the cost of living and crime, regardless of whether this is in someone's home or whether it's in their small business. I met with a small business owner recently who had to invest \$20,000 in various security measures because of all the damage and break-ins they were having. That's not unusual. I hear from residents all the time. That was one small business.

I met with another small business that is a doctor's office with specialized care, and it was the same thing. They've had so much damage around their building, and they're continually having to call law enforcement. It makes it really tough, to the point that their patients are sometimes scared to come close to the building, and this is an office that's been there for 30 years. She was saying that it's really been only about the last four or five years and, in particular, about the last three years, that it has become far worse. This is where it's affecting people's houses but also their small businesses. For her, she also had to incur extra costs. Someone asked her, "Why don't you just move?" She said, "I've been here 30 years." Her office is very close to a number of seniors' homes, and they're able to walk over, so it would be a real disservice if she had to move.

This is part of this government's soft-on-crime approach that has really made things a lot more difficult for businesses.

• (1250)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Fragiskatos, on a point of order.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I recognize very well, Mr. Chair, that it's not in keeping with the rules that I move anything on a point of order; however, I will offer this to the Conservative side and in particular to Mrs. Gray, who has been forced to speak for two hours at the direction of her leader's office to protect Michelle Ferreri, who just a few days ago made the outlandish comment that the poor are naturally bound to commit crimes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I have a point of order, Chair.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: For two hours, they have forced us to—

Mr. Kyle Seeback: This is not a point of order. Mr. Fragiskatos is engaging in hyperbole in an attempt to hijack this committee.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Since you were all speaking over one another, I will return to Mrs. Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

This committee generally does have agendas. This committee has been quite good at having agendas at particular meetings. We did have an agenda for this meeting; however, that agenda was taken away by other committee members, so here we are. The work of

this committee has been pushed ahead, not because of anything that the Conservatives have done today. It's been by other members of this committee, and that has now delayed the work of this committee.

Going back again to talking about how people are affected both by cost of living and crime, we know that small business is the backbone of this country. Many of us have small businesses in our communities. I have some larger businesses and medium-sized ones, but the vast majority are small businesses, and they include farmers. Farmers are businesses. Many of the orchardists and vinticulturists in my area are small businesses. They have seen the increase in their costs absolutely go up, in particular transportation costs.

I'll go back to what I was just talking about, which is the aspect of crime. As I said, this is something that I hear the most about from my residents. I do a lot of different surveys that go out, and I have thousands of people fill out surveys. The two biggest issues that people respond back on have to do with various aspects of cost of living and crime, because it is affecting many people.

I will mention as well, on the point of crime but also with helping people who are suffering from addiction, that I did have a private member's bill that was called the "end the revolving door act". When you look at addiction and recovery, there's a lot of health care that is provincial, but there are federal elements that we came across. There are some, and one of them has to do with federal penitentiaries.

My private member's bill would have had, for people who were incarcerated federally, that a judge could offer the person, if they were suffering from addiction—and 70% of people who are incarcerated federally suffer from addiction—to have a mental health assessment and then addiction treatment and recovery while they're in the federal penitentiary. This has happened in other jurisdictions. One of the biggest supporters was someone from the United States. This has happened in other areas, and there has really been a lot of success.

What happens is that people go to the federal penitentiary, and they don't deal with their addiction issues. They come out, and then they reoffend, so they're caught in a really bad cycle. While they're there, for however many years, we could offer them treatment and recovery.

Unfortunately, my private member's bill wasn't supported by all members in this House, and it did not pass at second reading. I think it's a real miss. Any time that I talk about this in relation to crime, I do hear huge support from people saying, "Geez, I wish that had passed." It's not going to solve everything, but it definitely would have helped some people who were going through addiction issues.

• (1255)

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Clearly state your point of order.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I believe, if you were to seek it, that there would be unanimous consent to adjourn the meeting.

The Chair: You cannot move a motion on a point of order; Mrs. Gray could.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Okay.

The Chair: Mrs. Gray, if you don't quickly get the floor, I'll move to the next speaker.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have five more minutes here before the meeting would be adjourned, so I'll just continue.

Just going back to the point of crime, we've seen Stats Canada data that shows violent crime has increased by 50%. Homicides are up 28%. Sexual assaults are up 75%, and gang murders have nearly doubled. When I'm back in my community and when I'm talking to small business owners, as I mentioned, this is a huge issue.

We know that auto theft is up 46%. Actually, we know that the justice minister's own car has been stolen three times. Extortion is up 357%. That is unbelievable. This is really happening because the government has made things easier for gangsters and for extortionists, really, to get out of jail and to reoffend a lot easier.

We know there have been a number of people who have gotten out on bail. Unfortunately, we continually see headlines where there are people out on bail and they're reoffending and creating really serious issues in communities and committing really serious crimes. We see it continually, and it's across the country. A lot of it does have to do with two pieces of legislation that were changed by the government. One amended the bail system, and another one removed minimum sentences from many very serious crimes, for example gun smuggling, drug trafficking and even car thefts. We've seen human trafficking numbers increase as well. Those numbers just came out, I believe, over the last week or so.

We see a lot of these increases in crime happening in many different categories, and it's affecting people's lives. It is a result of policies and legislation from this current government. Once a government has been in power for a while, you see the results of its policies and legislation play out. It has now been nine years of the current government, and you can see the results of its various poli-

cies and legislation, whether it's on the economic side or whether we're talking about the social side, the criminal justice side and crime. We're seeing the results of its various policies and legislation.

We know that there have been increases in random attacks of violence, very serious attacks, in broad daylight, that have affected families. We've seen this, in particular in British Columbia, play out quite a bit. Of course, it has made it worse because of the drug decriminalization that the federal government approved of by request of the NDP provincial government. Shortly afterwards, right after it approved of that, we started seeing open drug use in parks and playgrounds. I started talking about it. Many of my colleagues started talking about it. I remember one of the first times I asked about it in the House of Commons, I was shut down. I had to ask my question three times because people were outraged. Well, guess what? It was only nine months later that the provincial government asked to amend that policy, and the federal government finally did, after a lot of pressure.

This is what we've seen, Mr. Chair, play out over the last while.

We're at one o'clock. I believe we're adjourning at one o'clock. Is that right, Mr. Chair?

• (1300)

The Chair: Is that what you wish? Do you move to adjourn?

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I believe we can adjourn.

It's one o'clock. I'm sure we all have other commitments.

The Chair: Do you move to adjourn?

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I'll move to adjourn.

It's one o'clock. We all have other commitments.

The Chair: Did you move to adjourn?

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I moved to adjourn. The meeting is over.

The Chair: Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

An hon. member: I kind of want to keep going.

An hon. member: I think Tracy was just getting warmed up.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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